

# HOW WE SHOULD HANDLE RESIDENTIAL REPAIR JOBS

LEARNING FROM THE AUTOMOTIVE REPAIR INDUSTRY



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In our industry's ongoing battle with "Bad Bobs," one of the most fundamental issues is this: What is the most professional way to handle a residential garage door repair job?

It's clear that some dealers are manipulating these repair calls to their benefit, taking advantage of the customer's lack of knowledge about the cost of repairs and the need for certain repairs.

*So if we were to standardize a professional process for handling the customer who needs a door repair, what would that process look like?*



### Learning from the automotive industry

Fortunately, the automotive industry has already tackled this question, and they have developed some excellent solutions. Back in 2006, I first learned about the work of the Automotive Maintenance and Repair Association (AMRA), and I interviewed its president and some key leaders.

We published some noteworthy findings back then, but I don't think our industry was ready to grasp the significance of this information at that time. Few people, if any,

commented on those articles. Now, however, our industry seems not only ready to learn, but also willing to take actionable steps to improve.

Over the past 13 years, I have often reflected on the wisdom of AMRA's work. Today, our Bad Bob problem is much worse, and the entire industry is now ready to fight the problem. I think it's time we take a closer look at AMRA's solutions.

### The automotive Bad Bob

Here's a quick background on the problem that the automotive industry faced. Back in the 1960s and 70s, automotive repair shops were gaining a horrible reputation for ripping people off, and consumers didn't trust them. So the industry finally stepped in to fight the problem.

The parallels with our problem are obvious. Customers would bring in their cars because of some problematic situation (think "broken spring"). The car mechanic would take advantage of the customer's ignorance of the cost of parts and the need for various repairs (think "hardware overhaul"). The mechanic would then charge exorbitant fees for parts and services, and they would perform unnecessary repairs.

Sound familiar?

### Developing intelligent solutions

Finally, the auto industry's repair shops, suppliers, manufacturers, and trade

associations got together and created the Automotive Maintenance and Repair Association (AMRA) in 1992. Its goal is "to help eliminate negative perceptions, improve communication, and build trust."

AMRA then created a Code of Ethics, specific Standards of Service for mechanics to follow, a Pledge to Customers, and the Motorist Assurance Program (see [www.motorist.org](http://www.motorist.org)). All of these are worth studying and imitating, but let's focus on the issue of professional repair procedures.

### Three options for repair services

*At the core of AMRA's solutions are its distinctions of three options of repair services offered to customers.* The program requires participating mechanics to provide customers with written recommendations for these three options.

The repair options are (1) System Failure, (2) Preventive/Scheduled Maintenance, and (3) Improved System Performance. To translate them into our garage door culture, these three options would be as follows.

#### 1. Restore from door system failure

When a customer calls for door service, some specific problem needs a solution. This first and basic level of service restores the door system so that it is working again. Nothing more.

If a spring has broken, you replace it. If the photo eyes are out of alignment, you align

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them correctly. If the opener's capacitor is blown, you replace that part. Period. The only services provided at this level are the *bare minimum* services that restore the door to operating condition.

When presenting this option to customers, you might say, "To get your door system working again, we need to \_\_\_\_\_. That's the bare minimum that is required. We estimate that it will cost \$\_\_\_\_\_ for parts and \$\_\_\_\_\_ for labor. With applicable taxes, your total would be \$\_\_\_\_\_. Do you want me to proceed?"

## 2. Prevent an impending breakdown

A second option is a service that prevents an impending breakdown. This means that a certain part is at or near the end of its expected life, as defined by the manufacturer. If the part fails, the door will not operate, or it will perform poorly. Replacement of the part is *recommended*, but not *required*.

For example, let's say a door system has two springs, and only one has broken. It's clear that the other spring is near the end of its expected lifespan (e.g., 10,000 cycles). So, another spring breakdown is likely imminent.

You tell the customer, "You clearly need a new spring to replace the broken one. But the other spring is close to the end of its expected life. When it breaks, you will again be unable to operate the door, and you'll need another service call. I recommend replacing both springs. Your total bill would be \$\_\_\_\_\_, but it's your call."

## 3. Improve system performance

A third service option is improving system performance. This service is also optional, but not as serious as preventing a breakdown. This is where you suggest parts or service that help the door system to operate better.

For example, when inspecting a broken spring, you notice that the 10-year-old rollers are showing signs of wear. Even if a roller goes bad, the door system will likely continue to function. But new rollers will "improve system performance."

When presenting this option to customers, you say, "To get the door working again, I will need to fix \_\_\_\_\_. This will cost \$\_\_\_\_\_. In addition, if you'd like your door to operate better, I can fix the \_\_\_\_\_. This will cost

\$\_\_\_\_\_ for parts and \$\_\_\_\_\_ for labor. It's your option."

## 4. Repair or replace

But we're not done. One issue that is not addressed by the AMRA system is the problem of exorbitant repair bills. You could follow every step of the AMRA process and still stick the customer with a repair bill that can provoke outrage.

In the automotive world, it's relatively rare for the repair cost to exceed the cost of a new car. In our industry, however, it has become much too common. Charging that much for a repair is perfectly legal, but as we all know, it can result in negative customer satisfaction, terrible online reviews, and exposure in the local media that is embarrassing to the entire industry.

**...it puts the customer in the driver's seat to determine what happens to their property and their wallet.**

To fix this problem, I suggest option #4: Repair or replace. Simply put, *If the cost of a repair approaches the cost of a completely new door system, you must give the customer the option to replace the entire system instead of just repairing the problem.*

To add this fourth option to your standard procedures, you would say to the customer, "Your total bill for all the proposed repairs would be \$\_\_\_\_\_. But you should know that a brand new door with all new hardware will cost \$\_\_\_\_\_, which is about the same as the repair price. Which option do you prefer: repair or replace?"

## Why it works

The automotive industry has learned that their system has helped to restore public trust in their industry. But communication is key. The technician must clearly and honestly explain the problem and the options. That's why AMRA's program includes specific "Inspection and Communication Standards" (again, see [www.motorist.org](http://www.motorist.org)).

You'll notice that the program requires the technician to disclose the full cost of repairs *before they are made*. This is common professional courtesy, and it respects the customer's right to decline services.

## The advantages

The AMRA program respects the wallet of each customer, and it puts the customer in the driver's seat to determine what happens to their property and their wallet. If the customer can't even afford to "Restore from door system failure," they can say so.

Also notice that the program doesn't discuss pricing or tell dealers what they can charge. It merely requires the dealer to inform the customer when the repair price approaches the replacement price, whatever that is.

A key advantage is the improvement of our industry's reputation and the restoration of the consumer's trust. If a dealer followed this four-option process, it would be extremely unlikely for a customer to complain or call the authorities. To the contrary, the customer will likely be grateful for your honesty, compassion, and helpfulness. Each customer could become a "customer for life."

## Where to go from here

So how does our industry implement such a program? I think that, as in the automotive industry, this is a job for our industry's trade associations. The Task Force on Industry Reputation may choose to develop these ideas, or the Institute for Door Dealer Education and Accreditation (IDEA) might be the ideal organization to take the next step.

The program could become part of IDA's Code of Business Conduct. It might become a new IDA "Customer Pledge." Or perhaps it could become a new level of certification offered by IDEA to dealers who want to promote their ethical repair practices. Those organizations can work out the details.

But before we proceed, industry input is needed. What do you think of the four service options? What is the best way for the door and access system industry to implement professional standards of service? ■

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