

NewsStand - EXTENDED DRAIN INTERVALS, REVISITED

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This article appeared in National Oil & Lube News, October 2013

In the early nineties, Ford introduced a car specifically designed for women. How they did it is quite interesting. Their interior design team had the task of making the car not only comfortable, but easy to operate without breaking a nail. In fact, the designers all tested the knobs, buttons, switches and handles while wearing one inch nails. It can make you laugh when you picture it. The designers were probably laughing, too, but with the success of the Taurus Ford laughed all the way to the bank.

In 2007, Volvo one-upped the Ford story. Volvo's new concept car, introduced at the Geneva Motor Show that winter, was actually designed by women, not just men wearing women's nails. All decisions were made by women. The female think tank literally went outside the box to produce a low maintenance car that is practical, stylish and comfortable. The car even has a split in the headrest for women who wear a ponytail.

One of the more controversial features of the car was its 30,000 mile oil drain interval. Think about it, though. If you never had to do maintenance on your car or your roof or your appliances, that would be a good thing, right? There are probably many, both women and men, who wouldn't mind never having to do any maintenance whatsoever.

It's easy to see why there's been a gradual lengthening of drain intervals over the past fifteen years or more. Here's a quick overview of the primary factors having an impact on oil change intervals.

Manufacturers' Recommendations play a role in determining oil drain intervals. Oil change recommendations for American-made cars have run from 5,000 to 10,000 mile intervals in recent years. The longer drains today imply better quality. The ambiguous definitions surrounding "normal" and "severe" service create an atmosphere of uncertainty that makes consumers insecure about extended oil service.

Maintenance schedules for other parts of the vehicle have an impact on oil drain recommendations. A service regimen that dovetails oil change intervals with other maintenance checks is sensible.

Consumer wants include convenience, cost/value, clean environment, and friendly service. While keeping costs down is of importance to many, others — like the Volvo concept car team — are willing to pay more for convenience. For a growing number, impact on the environment is a preeminent concern.

Lubricant performance capabilities are an important factor when establishing drain intervals. At a certain point in time, depending on the quality of the oil, the oil breaks down and the additives are depleted. It is no good suggesting drain intervals beyond the service life of the lubricant.

Basestock supply availability is a factor. Longer lasting synthetic motor oils have become increasingly popular due to their extended life capability. Meanwhile, the basestock supply is limited. Nevertheless, there is plenty of supply to meet demand at current rates of growth, and for this reason synthetics should be promoted to any motorist driving a vehicle with a mechanically sound engine because of the benefits they provide.

Filter capabilities must also be evaluated. There is a limit to filter life, though new technologies are extending filter life to significant lengths. Proper filtration is an important facet of extending drain intervals and most major filter manufacturers have established service life standards that exceed the normal oil change recommendation.

Government regulations are also a driver in the equation. EPA pressures have pushed auto manufacturers to limit emissions while extending miles per gallon. The oil companies and automakers face serious technical challenges in this arena. As petroleum-based oil performance is beefed up, we've seen a shrinking price disparity between petroleum and superior synthetic oils, which more easily achieve the desired goals of regulators.

Consumer desire for convenience impacts drain recommendations. This has been a major driver behind the OEM push to lengthen drain intervals as Ford has recently done and GM accomplished with its Oil Life Sensors. Our lives are increasingly complex. Everyone is seeking ways to streamline. Motorists know that neglecting maintenance altogether is not in their best interest.

Ironically, the installed oil market found its origin in this desire for convenience on the part of passenger car owners. An increasing number of motorists did not want to change their own oil and an industry was born. Today, many busy motorists no longer see that trip to the lube shop as a convenience. The frequent oil change has become a hassle. Looking forward, market savvy opportunists who capitalize on this consumer discontent will have an edge on their competitors.

Balancing all these issues and the concerns of special interests has been no small feat. No wonder change is slow when so many factors must be brought into consideration. It would appear that sufficient experience, data and technology now exists to move forward.

Trendlines

The trend toward longer drain intervals may be disconcerting to an industry that makes its bread and butter from frequent oil changes, but there is another trend worth paying attention to. Fewer and fewer people are changing their own oil. The pool of potential customers is getting larger every year.

We live in a world that is ever-changing. If it's not too cliché, let's remember that change means opportunity. Profitably priced synthetic motor oils are a perfect solution for many of the challenges facing our industry. Know the facts, and share them with your customers.