

NewsStand - The Latest Buzz On Oil Drain Intervals

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Every now and then over the past several years I go online to find pictures of my first car, a 1961 white Mercury Meteor with a black interior. I loved that car, and could tell you a lot of stories about all the places it took me.

My dad brought it home the day I got my license. I was 17, which in New Jersey was the legal age at the time. The car had hit a wall at an angle, crumpling the right front end, smashing the headlight, but not disturbing anything in the engine compartment. What a contrast to today's cars which can fling shattered plastic across half the universe upon even a minor impact. Dad and I chained the car to a telephone pole, yanked out the wrinkles, replaced the lights... and voila! I had a "new car" for \$125.

Last month I found on YouTube a 30 second television commercial for that Meteor. This was a car of the future, they said. Stylish, yet affordable. And "4,000 miles between oil changes," the announcer exclaimed, the numeral 4000 superimposed upon the screen.

A 4,000 mile oil drain interval, can you believe it? And why didn't something like this catch on? Changing oil was not the highlight of most motorists' lives, especially in those early days before fast oil change facilities sprang up like mushrooms.

Against this backdrop my interest was peaked by a June story in USA Today regarding Jiffy Lube's new position on drain intervals. Throughout the week the story received attention in all of the major lube related newsletters, and even gained the attention of publications like Time magazine. It was a pretty big deal to many of these folks.

The Time.com story begins,

"Today, automakers are more likely to recommend that owners of new cars need to change the oil in their vehicles every 5,000, or even 10,000 miles. So why do some quickie lube service stations keep pushing the one-size-fits-all mantra of 'three months or 3,000 miles'?"

It's clear from the tone that the editors at Time do not have the highest respect for our quick lube industry, nor for the oil companies that feed the channel. Sadly, bad press from certain kinds of stories has a lingering effect, tarnishing many companies' good reputations and earnest desires to do what is right by their customers.

Once the industry relinquishes its insistence on a 3,000 mile oil change, many good things can happen. Here are a few of them.

First, by educating motorists about what their owners' manuals teach regarding oil change intervals we enhance our own credibility as a reliable source of information regarding their cars. I know a magazine editor who knew that her car carried a 7500 mile oil change recommendation, but the oil change shop insisted on placing that 3,000 mile sticker on her windshield. This kind of action undercuts everyone's veracity, leading people to think we're pre-disposed to gouging.

In an increasingly complex world motorists are desperately wanting to know who they can trust. Has the oil change industry's reputation been damaged beyond repair by its overlong adherence to a 3,000 mile oil drain recommendation? If nothing else, Jiffy Lube's new position on drain intervals is a move in the right direction.

I'm not going to stand here and throw stones at people who were pushing the 3,000 mile oil change. Old ideas are held on to because they are familiar and people feel comfortable holding them. Besides, conventional crude really did have

problems as the bi-products of combustion caused sludge and varnish to gum up engines. Anyone who has worked on cars for any amount has seen what a gunked engine looks like.

I do, however, take issue with those who denied that there was another class of oil with superior performance attributes, a class of oil that resisted breakdown and kept engines cleaner longer.

Twelve years ago or more I wrote about a two-tier drain interval recommendation which would allow quick lubes to maintain a 3,000 mile oil change recommendation for conventional petroleum while acknowledging and promoting a longer drain interval for premium synthetic oils. Certain people criticized this notion because it was complicated. It would be better to just have a single recommendation they said, and the proponents of a 3,000 mile oil drain distanced themselves from this idea.

Today some of these same people have no problem stating we should educate consumers about normal and severe service, an even more complicated task than the original recommendation with regard to conventional and synthetic at alternative drain intervals.

The second good thing about the Jiffy Lube news is that we may begin to see a less adversarial relationship between the oil industry and the auto manufacturers. Honesty is the basis of trust.

The internet has become a game changer for many industries, and ours is no different. There is a new demand for a higher level of transparency than ever before. When leading auto websites like Edmunds.com are publishing articles about insider tricks to rip off customers, you know there's only one route to go here. Integrity is what consumers are looking for.

Personally, I recommend a synthetic solution.