

NewsStand - The Match Game

by Ed Newman

AMSOIL Director of Advertising

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

Selecting the Right Oil for Your European Import Customers

One of the things that drives me nuts when I go shopping these days is how much variety there is. Shampoos come with a gazillion options... for greasy, normal or dry hair, with conditioner, without conditioner, etc. It was so much easier when you could simply go to the store and pick up a bottle of Head and Shoulders without having to read all these differentiators.

On a recent run to the store for deodorant I noticed once more that it is no longer a simple matter of replacing the Gillette Clear Gel Antiperspirant/Deodorant that I always get. No, the shelf was a quarter mile long and every brand had a full array of options, including styles of application from spray to gel to stick with names like Aqua Reef, Swagger, Blossom, Lemon Sage, Red Zone and Tahitian Breeze.

Toothpaste decisions are no easier. And even underwear is getting complicated. So, when customers come in for an oil change, you need to keep it in mind that the world has become a very confusing place and what your customer needs is less, not more, confusion.

As everyone in our industry can readily see, the variety of cars on the road is equally diverse. It's no longer a matter of GM, Ford and Chrysler makes and models. We have Rios, Pilots, Quattros, as well as those adorable Smart cars to learn about. Though the top four car models sold in America are Hondas and Toyotas, European cars are certainly popular in many of our American landscapes.

A recent top 10 list of European cars being sold in America included four models of Volkswagen, two BMW models, the Audi A4, Mini Cooper and two Mercedes-Benz models. Depending on where you live you may be noticing more and more of these cars. Do your lube shop employees know what kind of motor oil they require? I will tell you this up front: Depending on the type of engine, those Volkswagens take different kinds of oil from one another.

WHY EUROPEAN OILS ARE DIFFERENT

One reason motor oils in the U.S. and in Europe are different is because of the "sanctioning bodies" that establish the standards. In North America oil quality standards are set by the American Petroleum Institute (API), a trade association for the oil and gas industry. API sets minimum standards for automotive use here, primarily driven by efforts to satisfy increasingly stringent CAFÉ requirements (for fuel economy) and tighter emissions standards.

In Europe, oil quality guidelines are developed by the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association (ACEA). The ACEA recognizes that European engines differ from US engines in both their design and operating conditions. As a result the demands on their oils are different as well. Many automakers there run specific tests to make sure the oil meets specific performance requirements.

SELECTING THE RIGHT VISCOSITY IS NOT ENOUGH

A lot of us still remember when the only thing you needed to know about motor oil was when you last changed it and whether it was 10W-40 or not. It's a whole new world.

The primary differentiator among various makes and models of European car oils has to do with acceptable levels of sulfated ash, phosphorus and sulfur, which for convenience is called SAPS.

Sulfated Ash is the by-product of metallic compounds as they are burned. These compounds can improve an oil's antioxidancy, anti-wear properties, TBN, corrosion resistance, engine cleanliness properties and soot handling ability.

Phosphorus is present in motor oil for its antioxidant as well as anti-wear properties.

Sulfur is present in motor oil for the following functions: antioxidancy, anti-wear and engine cleanliness.

SAPS makes up a significant part of an engine oil's additive content. Different SAPS levels are necessary because some emissions systems and after treatment devices, such as diesel particulate filters (DPFs) and catalysts, are sensitive to the SAPS content of oil. These engines require lower SAPS formulations. Many vehicles, however, are not equipped with emissions systems that are sensitive to higher SAPS levels; they are best protected by full-SAPS oils.

The bottom line is that there's been an evolution in engine designs and in European lube recommendations so that we have low, medium and high SAPs formulations now. Even though 5W-40 engine oils are in widespread use in Europe, not all 5W-40s are created equal. Depending on the application they have different SAPS levels.

What's essential is that you instill confidence in your customer by knowing what oil to recommend. One reason they might be there is because they're as confused about their oil choices as I can be about making menu decisions in a French restaurant. At the end of the day, you'll want to make sure you have a reliable application lookup guide when it comes to European vehicles. By becoming familiar with and stocking these new oils you can become the "go to shop" and differentiate yourself from competitors. And when it comes to selecting an oil, I always recommend a premium synthetic in any mechanically sound engine. You should, too.