

NewsStand - Times Have Changed But Myths Remain

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It has been 25 years since I wrote an article titled "Ten Myths About Synthetic Lubrication" for *VW Trends* and reprinted in *4WD Action*. While recently reviewing this article I was somewhat baffled at how many of those myths persisted a quarter-century later.

So, let's re-visit the list and see how much impact a quarter-century of training, articles and advertising have had with regard to helping people get informed about the features and benefits of synthetic motor oils.

Here is that list from 1987, with comments:

Myth #1: Synthetic motor oils damage seals.

Yes, some people still believe this myth that synthetic oils will make engines leak. The reality is that whether conventional petroleum or synthetic, seal compatibility is something that is readily tested for and can be addressed in multiple ways to ensure it's a non-issue. It would be foolhardy for lubricant manufacturers to build a product that is incompatible with seals. And if synthetic motor oils damaged seals, these lubricants would not even be available or used as factory fill for dozens of today's makes and models of automobiles.

Myth #2: Synthetics are too thin to stay in the engine.

Same thing. The myth lives on despite decades of evidence to the contrary. A Texas friend told me that he's seen ranchers test the viscosity of the oil by feeling it between their fingers. There are more scientific ways to evaluate a motor oil's performance capabilities.

Myth #3: Synthetics cause cars to use more oil.

This is a variant on the above, but a little different. I think the volatile nature of conventional oil has been recognized and the superior stability of synthetic motor oils with regard to volatility has also been recognized. Even if people don't understand the why of it, they have experienced it. The historical reality is that it is the conventional oils that cause cars to need topping off due to boil off.

Myth #4: Synthetic lubricants are not compatible with petroleum.

My mechanic brother-in-law said, "I still hear that." And actually, I still get asked this myself quite frequently. People do not understand that both conventional and synthetic oils are comprised of a hydrocarbon molecular structure. The difference is that conventional oil is refined crude with not all impurities removed and that the molecules in synthetic oil are chemically designed. At root, both classes of motor oil are hydrocarbon-based molecules.

Myth#5: Synthetic lubricants are not readily available.

Haven't heard that one in a long time.

Myth #6: Synthetic lubricants produce sludge.

No, we don't hear this one much either.

Myth #7: Synthetics can't be used with catalytic converters or oxygen sensors.

No, not a myth that makes a lot of buzz these days.

Myth #8: Synthetics void warranties.

Sure, this one still gets air time. Twenty-five years ago no major manufacturer of automobiles banned the use of synthetic lubricants. As is well known, since that time increasing numbers vehicles have been introduced on showroom floors with synthetic motor oils as the factory fill. In order for a warranty to become void, it must be proven that the oil was the direct cause of the engine damage.

Myth #9: Synthetics last forever.

This is an interesting myth because many people who learn that synthetics are different from petroleum products assume that these super oils can last forever. While AMSOIL was first to introduce extended drain intervals of record length, other oil companies have followed with extended drain oils of their own. Motor oil manufacturers formulate for the drain intervals they recommend, and as yet I know of no oil company making engine oil that *never* has to be changed.

Myth #10: Synthetics are too expensive.

When the first synthetic oils appeared on the market in the seventies, they were 10 times more expensive than conventional oils. But the evolution in engine designs has required more sophisticated lubricants than those big bore V-8s ever needed. Even though synthetic oils are still more expensive the price gap has narrowed considerably. And when you recommend oils with extended drain intervals, the true measure of cost for consumers is not what the oil change costs, but what you spend over the course of a year. Add the reduced down time and improved fuel economy, and you can start to sell the savings.

Since behavior is influenced by what people believe, it's important to know the difference between truth and popular fictions. In this business, there's one more myth that concerns me. Some lube operators think you can't make money promoting synthetic oils and extended drain intervals. I would suggest that you can't afford not to. But let's save that for another column.