NewsStand - Why European Motor Oil Specs Are Different & What It Means To You

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This article appeared in National Oil & Lube News, October 2012

I learned how to drive New York-style while growing up as a teen in New Jersey. Minnesota Nice doesn't apply to driving in New York City. The fundamental lesson: keep your front bumper three inches from the rear of the guy in front of you and stay there. Don't give up an inch.

Decades later I was with my family for a couple days in the Big Apple. When leaving, we found that one lane of the Lincoln tunnel was closed for repair, thus finding ourselves squeezing from five lanes to a single lane there at the tunnel's entrance. Needless to say my previous experience paid off.

What I noticed while going through this process of inching forward into that tunnel was that nearly every car around me was an expensive foreign brand, primarily European makes. Here was a Mercedes, there a BMW. Here an Audi, there a VW Passat, a Volvo, a Jag, a Saab, a Mazda. What I didn't see in that crush of traffic was a straight up American-made car.

Obviously, times have changed. And it's important to understand this if we're going to be doing oil changes in these modern times where so many cars come from abroad.

It's becoming increasingly clear that we in the oil change business have homework to do in order to stay current with all the new specs being thrown at us by engine and drivetrain manufacturers. This column aims to give some insights regarding European and American oil specifications.

At one time European oil specs focused more on protection while U.S. auto manufacturers, driven by CAFÉ requirements, placed a higher emphasis on fuel economy. Today, both Euro specs and GF-5 have become more stringent in both areas, so this is no longer the big differentiator.

Some people wonder if the European specifications apply to European models in the U.S. or just those in Europe. The answer is yes, European specifications apply to European automobiles in the U.S. Mercedes Benz, BMW, and Volkswagen, for example, have their own very specific requirements that have followed those vehicles into the US market. This is why it's important for fast lube operators and their technicians to know about these European specifications. Installing conventional U.S.-type oils will in most cases not fulfill the European requirements and there is potential liability associated with installation of the wrong lubricant.

There are pros and cons regarding this differentiation between European oils and domestic motor oils. One positive is that lube operators who carry oils designed to meet European specs to differentiate themselves from their competition by promoting their ability to service these vehicles. Not all can or will cater to this market. Many European car owners go to the dealership, which is time consuming, expensive and ultimately unnecessary. These motorists are happy to know there is an alternative available. Also, selling European oils to that market is a high-end sale that commands a higher price.

On the negative side of the ledger, servicing European automobiles requires carrying additional inventory of appropriate oil and filters, which means costs could go up. It can also be more confusing for lube technicians who may not know the different specifications, though this is easily addressed by hiring properly and good training.

Bottom line is that European motor oils are different because the classifications are different. In the U.S., API and ILSAC regulate gasoline motor oils where the current specification supersedes the previous specification in most every instance. In this country, API SN and ILSAC GF-5 are the two current specifications. In Europe, the ACEA regulates the motor oils. There are eight active specifications for gasoline combined with light duty diesel oils alone, which are ACEA A1/B1, A3/B3, A3/B4, A5/B5, C1, C2, C3, C4. Differences between them vary from shear stability, to sulfated ash content, to extended drain intervals.

One thing you'll find in both markets is that as engine technology advances, the demands on motor oil continue to be ever greater. And there are reasons why an increasing number of makes and models are recommending synthetics. Looking for the donut is going to be insufficient in this market. You'll need to focus on those other details. The question is no longer, "Is it good for Volkswagens?" It is now a question of "which" Volkswagen spec the oil is good for. Does it meet VW 504.00/507.00?