

Understanding the auto body repair industry

Please remember auto body repair is very different than replacing parts on an engine or suspension, it requires a level of artistry a long with fit, finish and safety. If you have ever tried to patch a spot or spot paint a wall in your house, you very likely will have respect for the skills of an auto body shop and its staff. On the smooth skin of a car, any blemish shows and there are a never ending group of “experts” that would be willing to critique that part of the repair.

More importantly, precision is much more critical below the surface, with anything over the one to three millimeters of error being capable of affecting a car’s performance, appearance and/or structural stability. In fact, the knowledge and skills of a good body shops technicians and estimators must cover a wide range of subjects; the properties of metals and plastics, the mechanics of new suspension and steering systems, new welding methods, paint tinting and blending methods, ways to spot accident-related problems in mechanical/ electrical/ air-conditioning, and other systems, and much more.

Few consumers have, or would like to have, a long term working relationship with their local auto body shop. On average, the American driver will be in an accident once in five years. So when you do need the service of a body shop you should do a little homework before signing the repair order. In California you have the right to pick the repair shop and only you can authorize the repairs. Here are some of the ways to evaluate the shops:

1. **Curb appeal:** How does the shop present itself to the public? Is there parking and understandable flow to the area?
2. **First impressions:** How are you greeted? Does the office area look professional, clean, and organized? Does it have clean restrooms and waiting areas?
3. **Damage evaluation:** Was the estimate of repair explained to you in layperson’s terms? Did they explain how the insurance carrier and rental car companies operate?
4. **Warranty:** While the auto manufacturer’s generally only warrant the paint for 1-2 years, it is standard for body shops to warranty their workmanship- body and paint- for as long as you own the vehicle. The parts will have a separate manufactures warranty.
5. **Rental Car:** Generally speaking, if you are the insured (at fault party) you will get a free rental car only if it was written into your policy. If you are the claimant (not at fault party) you will all most always be given a free rental and usually it will be reasonably close to what you were driving at the time of the accident.
6. **Variables:** There are a lot of variables that affect how long the repair will take to complete. The main delays are: parts availability, insurance approvals, hidden damage and the amount of damage.
7. **Training and certifications:** Ask what the shops training includes. Top shops will be I-Car Gold, may have some factory training, should have welding certifications, should have access to manufacturers repair standards like All Data, should use quality re-inspection companies like Verifacts and should be active in their local and state trade associations.

Reasonable referral sources

- A. **Auto Dealership:** Most of the auto dealers do not own their own body repair shops. It is a very demanding business that requires years of experience to be a body man or painter. Body shops also do not charge as high of a labor rate as a dealership mechanical department charges. Therefore it is usual for the dealership to have 1-2 local shops that they refer their customers to for body repairs.
- B. **Insurance Companies:** Most shops are involved with insurance companies in what are generally called "direct repair programs or DRPs". Understand that by law, in at least California, you can have your repairs handled by any shop of your choice. While under contract with an insurer the shop will have to follow some guidelines that will, in most cases, dictate how the estimate is written. From a consumer's perspective, it simply means that the shop has an obligation to the insurance company to control costs by utilizing aftermarket or alternative parts and to mitigate the costs of the repair without compromising the repair quality.
- C. **Mechanical shops:** Good mechanical shops develop long term vehicle service relationships with their customers and can be a good source of referral to the areas auto body shops.
- D. **Friends and word of mouth:** Often friends can be a good source for referral. But keep in mind the experience, good or bad, was their experience and may not be what the majority of customers experience at that shop.
- E. **Advertising and the Web:** Auto body repair is generally a low margin of profit business; therefore most shops have curtailed their advertising. The Web is a good place to search because it will give access to not only a wide range of area shops but their web sites. Web sites can be very informative and provide that first impression.

In closing, the auto body repair experience is very different from a mechanical repair for many reasons. With a mechanical repair it is normally just you and the repair shop. With an accident repair there will be you, the trauma of the accident and body shop; plus your insurer, the other person who was involved (3rd party) and their insurer. But assuming there are not concerns with liability most claims are handled reasonably quickly and with the only variable being how long will the repair take to complete.