

Alan Woodward

What are the types of repair/service information and car parts with barriers which the cause most issues/greatest harm for your business and your customers?

Technical Service Bulletins, Service Item specifications (e.g. engine oil specification), Safety Bulletins (as distinct from recall campaigns) and technical repair information.
Software updates to keep electronic tooling up to date as new vehicles are released into the market
Also access to software and software updates for our tools (e.g. Scan Tools) to allow us to “connect” to the vehicles electronic systems for the purposes of diagnosis, repairs, ‘initialising’ newly fitted parts purchased from a new vehicle dealership, resetting ‘service due’ lights or indicators.
Being unable to purchase the specific tools which are made available to and used by the dealerships to service and maintain vehicles, particularly electronic tools. We can purchase aftermarket tools with the same capabilities but when software updates are released for the tools as new cars are released into the market, the updates are denied to the Australian market.

Accessing basic specifications for simple service operations, e.g. engine oil specifications to allow us to purchase the correct oil when servicing a vehicle.

An example from last week: Servicing a Volvo ZC90 2012 model. Referred to our oil supplier's website (Valvoline) and where the specific oil would normally be listed, it said “Refer to Dealer” (please see screenshots attached in the separate file accompanying this submission). Rang Valvoline to be told that, whilst they had a suitable oil available, they could not list this on their website as Volvo would not release the specification. I rang the Volvo dealer to be told that I must only use oil supplied by a Volvo dealer and they could only supply it in a 205 litre drum, the price per litre was also greater than the equivalent oil supplied direct to me from Valvoline. In short, I am forced to buy oil from Volvo rather than my usual supplier because Volvo won't release the oil specification for a particular engine. This impacts “car off road” times and cost to the consumer.

What are the barriers to accessing repair/service information and car parts?

In some cases Volkswagen will only sell us a car part for a customer's vehicle only if we undertake to return the original part we are replacing. Surely, the original part still belongs to the vehicle owner even if it is worn out or not working.

Limited information on manufacturer's web portals, being locked out when an Australian VIN (Vehicle Identification Number) is entered.

No Technical Service Bulletins posted on manufacturer's web portals.

No information provided when it is sought from dealerships.

Aftermarket tool suppliers being unable to source information

What justifications (if any) are given by manufacturers/dealers for these barriers, and why do you think these reasons are/are not valid?

We are often told by the dealer that we need to buy oils from them because aftermarket oils may not meet the necessary specification and may void the customer's warranty. The same oil suppliers (Castrol, Valvoline, Shell etc) also supply the manufacturer's and their dealers and have correct specification oils available. We are then forced to buy oils through the dealership network because the manufacturers won't release the specs.

On a local level, the staff at a dealership, when asked for particular information will often say they are not allowed to tell us and could lose their job as a consequence. Years ago they were more likely to pass on information as we had good relationships and bought parts through them.

What are the impacts of these barriers on consumers/your business?

Can they be quantified? E.g. estimate the impact on your ability to compete, your costs of doing business and prices paid by your customers, the overall impact on your customers.

We have had to re-book cars into our business, thus inconveniencing our customer, for work which in normal circumstances we would be able to complete within one booking. There are extra costs involved with delivering and retrieving a vehicle to and from a dealership to have a service or repair completed with tooling and software available only to a dealership network. This cost is often passed on to the owner, dependent on the particular service or circumstance. Either way it either affects our customer or our business. Ultimately the cost to our customer for the total job may still be less than what they would have been charged at a dealership but it is still higher than we could have done the job for had we had access to information, tooling and software.

Our ability to compete is impacted because customers will ultimately judge us against the competition and may decide it's quicker and easier to go to the dealership because they won't have to put up with the time delays caused by the work arounds we need to do.

What work arounds to the barriers do you use? What is the effect on your business, independent repairers generally and consumers of these work arounds (e.g. in terms of your costs, time to undertake a job, your ability to compete, your customers etc.?)

We often lean on staff at a dealership for information where we already have a relationship from past business dealings or through people moving about within the industry. Information often will come verbally but not via a formal document or web based information. At times we complete 95% of a repair and then take the vehicle to a dealership to complete. An example is:

Replacement of timing chains on a V6 Commodore. This is a common repair, however there is an upgraded specification/parameter in the ECU relating to the correlation between the cam and crank angle sensors. To complete the job a software upgrade needs to be done through the Holden Scan Tool only available to Holden dealers. We are charged \$57.20 ex GST to have this done and need to take the vehicle to the dealer for this, again cost and inconvenience to our business and our customer. (Please see a copy of an invoice from Holden Dealer in separate file accompanying this submission).

To what extent are these issues different/worse for regional repairers/consumers?

Depending on the make of vehicle, there is often not a dealer representing that make of car in Wangaratta, the nearest dealership may be in Albury/Wodonga (76Km) or Melbourne (250Km). This increases the impact on both time and cost for transport of a vehicle.

An example:

A customer's Renault Megane arrived to us on a tow truck. Their problem was their car key had lost its memory and would not recognise the car. With the correct software, one of our scan tools (e.g. G-Scan 2) would have the capability to re-code the key to the car for our customer. However as we could not do this, our customer arranged to have it flat-top towed from our workshop, at their expense, to Albury to have it fixed.

We did not charge anything to our customer.

For the consumer, I know many would rather the convenience of a local repairer like us and also like to support a local business employing local people and which adds value to the town. However they

are often forced to give their custom to a business elsewhere because we are constrained from being able to carry out repairs which we normally have the expertise to do.

What effect has the Heads of Agreement had on your ability to access repair and service information?

It has made it more difficult, especially for 'work arounds'. Dealerships are less helpful than they used to be, people we know or have relationships with have been told to clam up. Accessing information for such a vast variety of makes and models from manufacturer's websites is time consuming, often frustrating because of the barriers or limited information and varies greatly between vehicle makes.

Are you aware of any examples (general or specific) of where the Heads of Agreement and it's dispute resolution mechanisms are not working well?

Obviously the Heads of Agreement is not working well for all the reasons outlined above and more. If it was working as it was intended we would not be facing these issues and would all be competing on an even playing field. If it was working I would not need to be writing this submission.

As for the dispute resolution mechanisms, I am not aware of any examples either good or bad. The issues we face as a business are so wide and varied and relate to cars made by so many different manufacturer's that it would be impossible to go through a dispute process each time. This would add even more cost to our business and would not address a customer's immediate problem.

As I said at our meeting, for years we have been keeping pace with changes in vehicle technology by continual training and investment. We have been investing significantly in equipment and tooling upgrades and I know for a fact we are better equipped than some dealer service departments. We don't have a problem paying for the information and updates we need access to, we have been doing this for years and will continue to do so.

Thank you for your time considering my submission.

Yours Sincerely,

Alan Woodward
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Please see two accompanying files associated with this submission