

Professional Perspective



CAR SALES

Did you look at the Saab New Car Sales results listed on page 38 of NINES #280? At this point in time, the 2006 sales are really impressive. With the new pricing and new products like the 9-3 SportCombi, the future for Saab looks quite bright. This is good news considering that 2005 sales were just a half percent over 2004 sales figures even after having the best sales month ever (June 2005) in U.S./Saab history.

In a recent article on the 9-3 SportCombi in USA Today (March 30 issue), James R. Healey, gave the car a good review. It was puzzling, however, that a lot of space was used by Sean McNamara, Saab Product Manager, explaining why the SportCombi isn't just a hatchback or a wagon. He also tried to answer the question about why this car is not an all-wheel drive. It seems that if you tell the same story enough times, people will believe it's the truth. The inferred word is that Americans don't like hatchbacks and, therefore, won't buy them, so Saab has renamed the car a SportCombi. Isn't it a wagon? (It looks like, acts like, hauls like my 9-5 Aero wagon.) Well, maybe I'm confused and my car is really a 9-5 super SportCombi. As to the excuse about the design wouldn't accommodate all-wheel drive is a bunch of bunk! There has been a late 1980s model 9000 all wheel drive at the museum in Trollhattan for many years, and the same excuse was used when the 9-5 was introduced in 1997 at the Jubilee Celebration. Anyway,

the 9-3 got a good enough review by Mr. Healey, until we get to the quality section. Here's what it said:

"Quality: Possibly wanting, according to Consumer Reports magazine. The 2003-05 9-3s are in the magazine's 'used cars to avoid.' McNamara says all the problems were found and fixed by the 2005 model."

So I wonder, do you have any idea why sales have been flat for the 9-3 Sport Sedan? Would a "used cars to avoid" label by Consumer Reports do it? Why would this magazine give a rating like that to the 9-3 Sport Sedan? I believe it goes back to the Saab attitude about sharing service information, tools and training. Our shop decided over a year ago to upgrade our equipment without help from any special friends at Saab, to enable us to repair the 2003 and newer Sport Sedans. It took almost a year before we were promised, and received, all the upgrades and software for our Tech II. All the information is supposed to be available on the saabtechinfo.com Web site, and most of it is. We don't know how many independent shops have tried to get this information and the needed tools, but we think it is a very small number. When we had a question about the capability of the software and hardware, we were given one name to check out. The shop in question either couldn't get it to work or had not had it long enough to try it. As business owners, it's hard to spend thousands of dollars to buy subscriptions for information when we're not sure what we're buying or if it will do the job. Eventually, we received all the items we thought we needed and are now "off and running!" But, this new equipment/procedure has a very steep learning curve from working on 9-5s to the Sport Sedans. Why am I going through all of this? I have cited this statistic several times in my

NINES articles. The truth is, 80% of new cars/owners leave the franchise dealer's service department after their warranty runs out.

At this time, the 2003 Sport Sedans are going out of warranty so the repair record for this car has been with the franchise dealers. Who will fix them now? I know that in Minnesota there are only two franchise dealers, and our independent shop, that can work on the Sport Sedans. My fear is that the reputation of these basically good cars is going to continue to fall at an ever-increasing rate as they age. With 200 nationwide dealers and only a handful of independents, these cars will get terrible service and folks will not buy another Saab.

Moving on . . . I cannot escape the sludge issue. There have been so many poor oil tests at Oilmedic.com, and we are doing a random test (free from Oilmedic.com) on 45 of the 9-3s and 9-5s that fall into the suspect model years. We hope that will give us the real picture of engine conditions we want everyone to see. Talk about "poison pills." Recently, a new customer of ours made an appointment for his 2000 9-3 with 82,000 miles on it. It came in for the sludge checkup and failed! The owner refused all service and left to trade the car off or sell it.

Undoubtedly, this car will be his last Saab and furthermore will ruin Saab's reputation for one or two more owners before it is junked! How many friends and co-workers will hear about the Saab with the bad engine at "X" miles. I think the old saying is, "a dissatisfied customer will tell ten people about their troubles." Now that we're in the information age that number may be even larger. Did Saab save any money here?

Is enough information getting out about sludging? Maybe. In March, we got a used 1999 9-3 with

78,000 miles on it. This car was badly sludged. We had to remove the cylinder head and have it boiled out as well as cleaning the pan, etc. as our flow chart shows. (See our Web site for the Flow Chart under the service tab. Please use the chart! It works!) The bearings were good, and now the car is running great with oil pressure that meets Saab specifications. Perhaps you're thinking, "How could this be?" I have written about the oil pick-up screen. It's very fine and actually acts like a primary oil filter to protect the oil pump. I know there are some who are modifying the screen so it can flow more oil. If you cut a used oil filter apart you'll find very little, if any, of the sludge particles in it. They have been strained out by the screen. That's a good thing because the oil pump will wear out prematurely if you run the junk through it. On the other hand, if the screen is your primary concern, you can install one of Bob Bright's oil pans and easily clean the screen when you change oil--the best of both worlds! Protect that oil pump. They're expensive and take a lot of labor to change!

A car from PA came to us because at 45,000 miles it had a puff of blue smoke on start-up, and cold engine noise. A dealer and an independent both recommended that the engine be replaced. Sludge! After our regular checkup was completed, we found that this car needed a turbo replacement and a timing chain swap that is done in the car. Otherwise, we just needed to follow our flow chart. Engine replacement? The owner drove this car every day with a supposedly bad engine, and even drove it to Chicago to meet our car transport without any problem. Another engine saved from an untimely end! The owner was missing just one oil change receipt from a previous owner, otherwise Saab would have helped him out.

Even with the missing receipt, it was only over by 200 miles from the recommended 10,000 mile changes.

Here's another story. I got an e-mail from Tom Spencer in NH. He purchased a 2001 9-5 Aero with 85,000 miles at an auction. The actual bidder had decided the engine was quiet and had no problems! Tom had great confidence in the purchase because of his past long experience with Saabs. (His family currently has five Saabs; the oldest is a 95-9000 Aero with 360,000 miles.) After receiving the car on a transport, he heard a noise from the upper end of the engine. He took it to a Saab dealer and received an estimate of \$2,900 to repair the timing chain! The chain can be replaced in the car in a couple of hours. The tool needed to replace it is for sale on the saabinfotech.com Web site. It's listed as an "essential tool" for dealers. Initially, Tom was shopping for a used engine because he could put that in himself.

However, with some new data about sludging and repair information that we're more than willing to share, he thinks he can now fix the engine himself. We think education is the key! Tom has even figured out how to substitute the Saab tool with something else to roll the new timing chain in. (The Saab tool costs approximately \$800 according to Tom--much cheaper than the dealer prices!) Some technicians try to say that the timing chain slides all have to be replaced, which requires an engine removal. That's usually not the case. The edge of the slide is worn by the side links down to the point where the roller is rolling on the slide. At that point, wear on the slide is very, very slow and chain replacement can be done safely without the slides! Don't believe it? Just measure the chain extension after the replacement.

Saab refuses to fix any of the cars that can't prove service from Day

One. Service contract companies like General Electric have decided that sludge issues are the manufacturer's problem since they have admitted fault. So, the warranty companies are refusing to honor claims that have anything to do with oil sludge. Who are the losers? You and I. Unless Saab figures out how to compensate for some of the losses there will be thousands who will never drive a Saab again. Saab has always made a good product but needs to stand behind these current problems with repairs, parts, information, etc.

UPDATE: Bob Bright arranged appointments with the appropriate officials at the "big three" domestic automakers and brought his debris-accumulator oil pan to show them. At Chrysler they said that they didn't have a problem! Ford thought he was an infiltrator or a subversive, and he was detained by security guards who didn't know what an oil pan was. (Bob had one in his briefcase). Bob went to GM, and they said that they liked the idea and would get back to him. Bob also visited a number of Saab Dealers whose responses ranged from "Yes, there's a possible problem with sludge" to "No, we don't know what you're talking about." One dealer had a stack of 2.3 engines, removed and discarded. If the truth were known, most all of these engines could be saved! I don't believe technicians today can identify engine noises, and they have never had to service the bottom end of the engines. Where is John Moss when we have all these people to train?

Think car sales, Saab. Take care of the cars you have already produced. Satisfied customers buy new cars!

For 31 years Chuck has owned and operated a sales, service, autobody and parts facility specializing in Saabs.