

BMW SERVICING

INDEPENDENT

STORY: DAVID SUTHERLAND

Franchise dealer or specialist? A no-brainer surely – as long as you use an expert, not a cowboy. We visited a BMW indy firmly in the former camp

Every time you drop your car off at a franchised dealer for service or repair, the meter starts running on the cost. According to industry experts, the average labour rate across the UK is £65 per hour, but that leaps to £76 within the M25. And if you own a prestige car, say an Audi, BMW or Volvo and live in the south east of England, be prepared to pay £130 or more per hour, even for an oil change. Come back plumbers, all is forgiven.

But at an independent garage – that is, one that hasn't signed up with one particular car manufacturer – charges plummet. The national independent labour rate is not much more than half, at £39 an hour, while in London you pay about a third less – £49.

They say you only get what you pay for, so are franchised dealers offering a vastly superior service? Or are the independents

offering the same deal minus the potted plants and cappuccino machines in reception?

For years franchised dealers and independents have worked in a fairly well defined way. For the first three or four years from new, cars have tended to be looked after by dealers, because the normal three-year factory warranty required it, and also because owners assume them to be the experts. Business usually transfers to the independents when second or third owners won't pay dealer rates.

But in mid 2004 a fundamental if little publicised change occurred. Prompted by changes in European car dealership laws, car makers let go the requirement that the validity of the warranty depended on a dealer service record.

The magic words, contained in an industry Code of Conduct, were that owners would "continue to benefit from the

manufacturer's new car warranty while the car is serviced to the manufacturer's recommendations, even if the work is carried out by an independent service repair/outlet".


So now you can save money by using an independent garage and still have a warranty. The one problem is finding a good one.

They do exist, and tend to have two things in common. First, they specialise in one marque (or perhaps several, say German prestige cars); second, their proprietors usually spent years in a franchised dealership of that marque before striking out on their own.

Indeed the larger specialists are quite often former franchised dealerships who wanted to carry on working on the cars but without the restrictions imposed by the manufacturer. And in some cases, independents work quite closely with dealers; they buy parts from them, and with their long experience can often trace faults on older/higher mileage cars that dealers can't.

Meet Gary Woollatt, the classic independent one-marque (in his case BMW) specialist. Gary has recently moved his Autobahn business into new premises near Rickmansworth in Hertfordshire.

Now 45, Woollatt started out in 1979 as a mechanic in a BMW dealer in Ruislip, north west London, and with the exception of a diversion into Mercedes-Benzes for a couple years, has been working on BMWs ever



Gary Woollatt of Autobahn, now based in Rickmansworth. With extensive diagnostics gear, he can reach the parts other garages can't – and at much lower prices than franchise dealers charge

since. From BMW 1-series to exotic Alpina models, he'll service or fix it.

He charges £65 per hour for labour, half the rate at the nearest official BMW dealership, Scotthall Watford. Hence, an 'Inspection I' service on a previous-shape BMW 320i will cost £182 instead of £280, and an 'Inspection II' £249 against £375.

But it's not just the lower prices that attract business to the one-man-band that is Autobahn. "From the moment people ring up to make the appointment (booking lead time is usually 3-4 days) to the time they collect the car, they're dealing with me only, and I think people like the one-to-one approach," Gary says.

"It's nobody's fault, but quite often in a dealership there's a lack





of clarity, because the interpretation of the problem or symptom a customer describes changes as it goes through various people."

The personal touch at Gary's three-car workshop means he gets to know his regulars. "A lot of customers have become friends over the years," he says.

A smiling face and lower prices aren't everything, though. A worthwhile specialist not only needs to have invested in the right diagnostic equipment that modern, electronics-laden cars depend on, and to be able to use it properly, but also to have a good old fashioned seat-of-the-pants feel for the cars worked on.

Some on the independent servicing side don't even qualify on the first count. "I get quite a

few garages who don't have the diagnostics asking me to diagnose faults for them, but not to fix them," says Gary, who has an extensive range of tooling and equipment going back 20 years.

The skill comes in interpreting what the workshop computer is saying about the car. "BMW's, even though they're now more affordable to buy, have become extremely complex, and even with the right machinery it can be difficult to pinpoint a fault, as sometimes rogue faults show up on the system." And that's when experience of the car counts for everything.

One of the worries owners may have about straying from franchised dealers is that inferior quality parts might be used. It can happen, but a distinction

should be made between dodgy parts imported from dubious sources (much less widespread than a decade ago) and those sourced directly from the supplier, and thus identical to the manufacturer-branded parts except that they come in a different box and are cheaper.

Gary Woollatt uses directly sourced parts where he knows there is a worthwhile saving, for example BMW brake callipers, which he says he gets for £190, compared to £270 for the 'official' item. However most of the time Autobahn simply buy parts from BMW dealers at usual trade discount.

So, the ideal independent is knowledgeable, friendly, well equipped, modestly priced and flexible. But how do you find it?

Garages which come up to recognised motor trade standards can join the Retail Motor Industry Federation, and display signage, but that's of limited help because there are about 4000 of them.

Some advertise in Yellow Pages, but in the end it comes down to word of mouth. Enquire at the local franchised dealer, but best of all ask other owners – people love to recommend someone who's done a good job.

People just like Gary Woollatt.

Autobahn

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*labour rate averages from RMI/Sewells Pay Guide, 2005, all prices quoted include VAT