

Let's talk about motor oil...

I feel there is significant misconception surrounding the life blood of engines, motor oil. My hope in writing this is to easily help car owners avoid expensive repairs and shop to help prevent causing the repairs through education.

To be clear, I am neither a Chemical nor Mechanical Engineer, so these are merely my opinions based on observations only. I am, however, a European parts specialist since 1987 and have worked as an ASE and State certified European car Mechanic, service writer, and currently co-own the largest strictly European parts warehouse distributor in the Mid-West.

What I have learned is that using the wrong spec oil is clearly the major contributing factor to many different engine issues today. Here's why I say this: Starting with Porsche in about 1995, followed by Mercedes in 1998 and BMW in 1999/2000, there have been oil specs beyond the common understanding of just weights. I've asked more than 100 people over the years: "who taught you how often to change your oil?" and it was almost always answered with "my Dad". Naturally, his dad was taught by his Dad before him. In 1936 my Grandfather's Dodge truck, it stated right in the manual the need for an oil change interval of 1,500 miles. On the other hand, many oil changes today are recommended at 10, 12, 15,000 miles or more. This is perfectly acceptable by the manufacturer for the simple reason that we have better oils.

The European's appeared first in having specs for their oils, such as VW 505.01 or BMW LL-01. Any BMW, VW/Audi or Mercedes built since ~2000 have special additives in their oils to avoid or solve certain issues with their engines. For example, BMW M52/54 have major issues with their PCV valves collecting moisture. When they gather enough and get hit with a day of below freezing temperatures, they blow holes in their valve covers or if you're lucky they blow a valve cover gasket only.

What we've learned selling valve cover gaskets is to always recommend a PCV valve on those engines and switching back to the right oil spec to clean up the PCV system. Believe me when I tell you that the first day below 15 degrees in Michigan, we get flooded with calls for valve covers.

Every oil rep that enters our business is asked the same question, "in your estimation, what percentage of shops are using the right spec oil every time". The answers are usually either, none or 10-15%.

What else does using the wrong spec oil cause?

My suspicions are as minor as oil leaks because of the lack of seal softening additives, but also including the aforementioned PCV blockage, intake runner adjustment linkages, timing chain wear ("stretch"), premature turbo failures, stuck rings... all kinds of failures in the Camshaft adjustment solenoids.

Why do some timing chains and tensioners on VW/ Audi fail and others don't? Did anyone ever think to check which oil spec was used? Before you jump to think it was a "bad batch" of chains, consider that most shops are not installing the right oil.

Ford uses UV dyes in their 2010 and newer oils so that if the customer comes back with a problem because the wrong oil was used the dealer can immediately identify the problem and then there goes the warranty. That 5.0L engine is so sensitive that some wrong oils will set the engine light and can only be solved by switching to the right spec oil. I've seen that situation only twice, but could share stories all day long about other wrong oil spec mishaps.

I hope this article makes you think hard when you decide which oil to put in your car next.

Happy motoring,

Luke Wright

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