

Access to Digital Service Records for Independent garages

Vehicle manufacturers are increasingly ditching the physical, printed maintenance records in favour of online digital service histories. The argument is that it is more convenient and efficient, with reduced scope for mileage fraud. But the elephant in the room is that it is another barrier put in place by the vehicle manufacturers to exclude the independent garage from servicing the cars they make.

Digital Service Records (DSR) have actually been in the market now for over ten years and were first pioneered by Mazda. The basic premise is that rather than a glove compartment service history with dealer and garage stamps, service and repair information is stored on a secure online database. This is updated each time the car is serviced and so in theory, every vehicle will have a complete service history that can never be lost. Manufacturers rightly point out that up-to-date and accurate records enhance a car's resale value and make it harder for anyone to make fraudulent service entries or tamper with the odometer reading. They also argue it is more convenient for the customers as it opens up the possibility of automatic reminders.

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Many other vehicle manufacturers have now gone down the same road, with Audi, BMW, Ford, Mercedes, Toyota and VW all introducing systems. In fact just about any car made since November 2012 will have the capability of having a Digital Service History stored online.

Dealers of course can easily access their own franchise systems and update the records quickly and easily. But what about independent garages? The regulations on the issue are clear. EU rules state that

electronic service records should be accessible for independent garages, free of charge.

The reality is of course a little different. For an independent garage to access these records they must first find the appropriate website, which is not always easy, complete a registration process and then sign into the site each time they want to provide an update. The issue for most independents is of course that they service and repair a wide variety of makes and models and therefore have to register manually with each car marque. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that without training using most, but not all, sites is not a very user friendly experience and technical support is at best limited or may be non-existent.

There is also the issue of misinformation. Some dealer staff are somewhat economical with the truth on this subject and will imply that only an authorised dealer can update the records, in the same way some imply that only a dealer can protect a warranty. The motoring public's awareness of their rights on this issue is virtually non-existent, so the dealer does have an advantage.

A further concern for the independent



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sector is how this stored data is used. The manufacturer can engage in what is known as predictive marketing, to alert a driver to the need for a service or vehicle check, again creating a further means of locking business in and keeping the motorist with a dealer for longer. This also applies where a car is sold on, as the records remain on the centralised system.

So is there an easy solution for the independent garage? The simple answer is no.

This system is not going to go away and to maintain a professional customer service garages do have to engage. Unfortunately this means time consuming and frustrating multiple site registrations and having to update records, which will of course take much longer than stamping a book.

Perhaps the most vital issue is that independent garages know their rights to access and update this information and make sure their customers know as well. It is yet another barrier for independent garages to overcome, but appears to be one they will have to learn to live with.



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