

How to find a reliable mechanic

If your car breaks down — or when it needs routine maintenance — choosing a quality repair shop makes all the difference.

Fortunately, local drivers have lots of first-rate choices, according to Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook magazine and Checkbook.org, which evaluated 494 Bay Area auto repair shops by collecting ratings from more than 15,000 repair shop customers, reviewing complaints filed with local Better Business Bureaus, comparing prices on various repair jobs and collecting other information on each shop.

Of the 494 shops evaluated, 78 were rated "superior" overall by at least 95 percent of their customers who were surveyed. But about one-fifth of the shops got such a rating from fewer than 50 percent of their customers. (Read the full report for free for the next four weeks at www.checkbook.org/chronicle.)

The good news is that choosing a top-quality shop need not cost you top dollar. Checkbook's undercover price shoppers have collected thou-

Editor's note: The Chronicle is working with Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook magazine and Checkbook.org, a nonprofit consumer group that rates various types of local service firms and professionals, to help you find the highest-rated services in the Bay Area. For the next four weeks, Chronicle readers can read Checkbook's full report, with ratings of 494 Bay Area auto repairs shops and advice on choosing and dealing with auto repair firms, free of charge, at www.checkbook.org/chronicle.

sands of price quotes on standard jobs and found no relationship between the prices shops charge and the quality of their work. Many of the shops rated tops for doing repairs properly are among the lowest priced.

And the price differences can be dramatic. For example, to replace the starter motor on a 1999 Honda Civic DX, prices ranged from \$273 to \$618.

On average, nondealers — shops that don't sell cars — were less expensive than dealers. Nondealers also received, on average, higher ratings for

quality from their customers than dealers, so unless your car is under warranty, you may improve your odds of getting a good job by choosing a non-dealer.

Whichever shop you choose, here are some things you can do to increase your chances of getting good results:

▶ Write a detailed description of your car's symptoms, with a copy to be attached to the repair ticket, a copy for the repair technician and a copy for yourself. Describe how the problem sounds, when it happens, how long it has been going on, how the car drives.

▶ If you know what needs to be repaired, tell the shop. If you know that your car's battery has gone dead because of a loose fan belt, don't just say the car won't start. But if you don't know what repair you need, don't make a guess just to sound knowledgeable.

▶ If possible, talk with the mechanic who will be working on your car. If you get to know a mechanic and are satisfied with his or her work, ask for the same mechanic whenever you bring in your

car.
▶ Either get a written estimate in advance or write on the repair ticket, "no work is to be done without customer's approval based on a written estimate." All shops in California are required to give you a written estimate. A shop can't charge more than its estimate unless authorized by phone or in writing by you. If all the work to be done is covered by a warranty, write on the repair order "only warranty repairs are authorized."

When you go to pick up the car, get a written, dated invoice detailing the mileage, the work performed, each part supplied, whether it is new or rebuilt, and all labor charges. California shops are required to provide such invoices, and you'll need one if you have problems later.

▶ If the car is still not right, it's best to leave it until the work is done. If you need the car immediately, or if you don't discover the faulty repair until you have left the shop, notify the shop in writing immediately, and keep a copy of your note or e-mail.

Some of Checkbook's top-rated auto repair shops are listed below. Call in advance to make sure a shop works on your make and model.

Name	Address	City	Phone	County
Art's Automotive	2871 San Pablo Ave.	Berkeley	(510) 540-7093	Alameda
Oceanworks	2703 10th St.	Berkeley	(510) 849-1383	Alameda
Stauder Automotive	5930 College Ave.	Oakland	(510) 658-3070	Alameda
Y A S Automotive	1699 University Ave.	Berkeley	(510) 841-8801	Alameda
Young's Automotive	3509 Grand Ave.	Oakland	(510) 444-4185	Alameda
Complete Auto Service	2610 Monument Court	Concord	(925) 827-0966	Contra Costa
Rob's Automotive	10192 San Pablo Ave.	El Cerrito	(510) 525-6519	Contra Costa
Walnut Creek Autopros	1520 Third Ave. #A	Walnut Creek	(925) 933-1050	Contra Costa
Woodard's Automotive	12831 Alcosta Blvd.	San Ramon	(925) 830-4701	Contra Costa
Beckstrom Automotive	70-B Woodland Ave.	San Rafael	(415) 457-6050	Marin
Easy Automotive	145 Jordan St.	San Rafael	(415) 457-1688	Marin
R & I Automotive	625 Del Ganado Road	San Rafael	(415) 479-2662	Marin
Auto 280	1315 Ocean Ave.	San Francisco	(415) 333-8622	San Francisco
Cowden Automotive	875 Folsom St.	San Francisco	(415) 777-9858	San Francisco
Emerald Auto	645 Judah St.	San Francisco	(415) 564-1330	San Francisco
Melrose Motors	358 10th St.	San Francisco	(415) 387-4725	San Francisco
San Francisco Auto Works	1021 Valencia St.	San Francisco	(415) 282-4300	San Francisco
Fred's Garage	416 D St.	Redwood City	(650) 368-5343	San Mateo
Kano Automotive	1710 Leslie St.	San Mateo	(650) 571-5253	San Mateo
Kuno's Independent	881 Douglas Ave.	Redwood City	(650) 368-7445	San Mateo
M & R Automotive	1281 El Camino Real	Menlo Park	(650) 325-3900	San Mateo
Portola Valley Garage	4170 Alpine Road	Portola Valley	(650) 851-7442	San Mateo
A & A Auto Service	961 S Third St.	San Jose	(408) 292-5901	Santa Clara
Campbell Ford Performance	2541 Winchester Blvd.	Campbell	(408) 374-6131	Santa Clara