

June 17, 2009

## It's paid for

"It's paid for" ... three little words that have come to mean so much to so many. Could they have contributed to the automakers' troubles?

Case in point—yesterday my colleague, Tim, and I were talking about his recent new-car purchase. You may have read about the [mishap involving his 11-year-old vehicle](#). Clouding his excitement about owning a brand-new car is the realization that he now has car payments. I understand completely.

My family has two vehicles, vintage 2000 and 2002. In spite of their ages and the fact that newer models look different and have more bells and whistles, we are quite fond of these automobiles. That they are paid for makes them even more attractive to us. I commented to Tim that I have less than 100,000 miles on my 2000 Jeep and intend to drive it for as long as it will run—or as long as I have someone to service it (we'll get to that).

Apparently my neighbors are doing the same. I still see the same cars in the 'hood that I've seen for years. It seems more people are holding on to their vehicles as long as possible. That wasn't always the case.

When I was a child (a phrase that makes children everywhere roll their eyes and say "here we go again"), my dad, an educator who raised five children on a single-income salary, traded cars at least every four years—sometimes sooner. All Fords and Chevrolets. The imports had not yet made it into the country when I lived with my parents, but even after they did, Dad and Mom always bought U.S.-made vehicles.

When I became an adult and began my own family, the pattern continued—new vehicles every two to four years, mostly General Motors brands. The relationship with GM ended when I bought my first Jeep in 1996 and traded it for the "newer" model in 2000. Since then, I've cast fleeting glances at newer versions of my Grand Cherokee Limited but have remained faithful to my tried-and-true, paid-for model, even when I've had to spend outrageous amounts for upkeep. Did I mention it's paid for?

With people keeping cars longer, parts sales are booming. A [report in \*The Paducah Sun\*](#), quoted Michael Wilson, executive vice president of the [Automotive Recyclers Association](#), a Fairfax, Va.-based trade group, who said auto parts recycling and repair are up nationwide. "With the average age of a vehicle on the road these days at 9.7 years, folks are keeping those vehicles," he said. "It's very prudent to keep them repaired, especially in these economic times."

The report also quoted [CNW Marketing Research](#) Analyst Art Spinella, who said, "This year, there will likely be about 1.3 million potential new-car intenders who are expected to instead buy a 1- to 5-year-old used vehicle, based on the first four months of 2009. Additionally, parents who have increasingly purchased new vehicles for their children are buying used cars and trucks instead." Could this stem from a reluctance to take on higher car payments?

All vehicles, new and used, require service. I long had thought that when my Jeep's service costs exceeded its trade-in value, I *might* think about replacing it, even though it's paid for. Now I have other reasons to think about trading. There's "[cash for clunkers](#)," but in my mind, the Jeep hasn't reached clunker status yet. A more pressing reason is that the Chrysler dealership where I bought the Jeep and have had it serviced for nine years was among those closed. I guess my service options now are to find a new dealership farther away; go with a chain service facility; use the [Web site Tim recommended](#) to "find a great mechanic," or follow my nine-year service adviser to his new location at the local Ford dealership, where he said his former customers are welcome to bring their vehicles for service. Way to go Ford! Another smart move on your part.

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