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An overlanding staple and often an entryway into full vehicle customization, rooftop tents appeal to aftermarket shops looking to provide off-roaders a homey touch at their next base camp. *See article on page 12.* (Photo courtesy Yakima; inset photo courtesy OPTIMA Batteries)

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Jef White
Editor in Chief
theshopmag.com

Aftermarket Projections Call for Steady Growth

American consumers spent approximately $52.65 billion accessorizing and modifying their vehicles in 2024—up slightly from a reported $52.3 billion in 2023. Aftermarket projections from the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) call for measured, steady sales increases in 2025 and beyond, as well.

"SEMA anticipates continued growth through this year, albeit slower than the COVID-period boom when enthusiasts used their free time to work on their vehicles," officials noted in the announcement of the association's 2025 Market Report. "The following several years should see a gradual return toward a more normal, long-term trend of 4% to 5% annual sales growth."

Research shows the nation's automotive fleet is growing, likely due to high new-car sales and consumers keeping their vehicles longer. The average age of vehicles in the U.S. continues to climb, reaching a record high of 8 years in 2025, according to S&P Global Mobility.

As the average sales price of vehicles continues to rise as well, more owners will likely seek out repairs, upgrades and modifications that extend their vehicles' lifespans, utility and performance, meaning plenty of opportunities for specialty shops.

Most product categories showed steady or slightly rising sales numbers in 2024, and SEMA projects continued growth through 2025. Among top performers, suspension, exhaust and engine control products enjoyed an approximately 2% rise, a continued trend as they've maintained similar increases since 2021.

After seeing a pandemic resurgence, mobile electronics sales in 2024 declined somewhat, mainly in the areas of GPS navigation and sound systems. Sales within the category have slowed in recent years as new vehicles now feature more high-end electronics, are becoming more technologically advanced and include improved smartphone integration.

Looking at vehicle types, pickups continue to dominate the market, while crossover utility vehicles (CUVs) are the fastest-growing segment on the road. Conversely, there's been a continued drop in production and sales of traditional cars (coupes and sedans), and some sports cars are also seeing cuts in production, the study finds.

On the supply side, the specialty equipment industry's early adoption of online sales to meet the demand for parts not available through typical retail locations has impacted consumer habits. The report shows enthusiasts now split their spending equally between offline and online channels and have fully adopted mixed-mode shopping, sometimes purchasing online and picking up at a local brick-and-mortar location.

Looking ahead, one area that could spur future growth is the market for "new classics"—vehicles from model year 1989 and older that serve as weekend cruisers and/or are exhibited at car shows.

"Collectors gravitate to the vehicles to which they have some emotional connection to—a car from a beloved movie or a truck that the cool older kid in the neighborhood drove. It's only natural that this pool of vehicles now includes models from the 1980s," says Christian Robinson, SEMA senior director for state government affairs. "These are the vehicles that the next generation of collector will embrace—a DeLorean like the one from 'Back to the Future,' or, eventually, a 90s-era Supra from 'The Fast and the Furious' movie franchise. As we witness this evolution, it's important that we provide a foundation for the preservation and continuation of our nation's rich automotive heritage." ***TS***

THE SHOP

EDITORIAL

EDITOR IN CHIEF: Jef White
jwhite@cahabamedia.com

MANAGING EDITOR: Chris Main
cmain@cahabamedia.com

EXECUTIVE EDITOR: Jennifer King
jdking@cahabamedia.com

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS:
John Carollo, Mike Madriaga, Phillip M. Perry, Tony Thacker

CREATIVE SERVICES

ART DIRECTOR: Elizabeth Chick

DIGITAL PROJECT MANAGER: Greg Ragsdale

WEB DEVELOPER: Greg Caudle

ADVERTISING

SENIOR ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE WEST COAST
Krystal Franklin
kfranklin@cahabamedia.com

CLIENT SERVICES COORDINATOR (ADVERTISING):
Holly Strickland
hstrickland@cahabamedia.com

CIRCULATION

SUBSCRIPTION CHANGES & INQUIRIES:
theshopmag@omeda.com

CAHABA MEDIA GROUP

PUBLISHER: Matthew G. Conroy

VP OF SALES: Greg Meineke

VP OF FINANCE: Brandon Whittemore

DIRECTOR OF CONTENT: Elizabeth Manning

DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS: Laurie Tisdale

DIRECTOR OF SALES: Stacy Marshall

P.O. Box 530067
Birmingham, AL 35253

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Taking Care of Your Health Care Costs

The business world needs fresh paths through the health insurance wilderness.

BY PHILLIP M. PERRY



New York City-based journalist Phillip M. Perry publishes widely in the fields of business management and law.

Employers expect health insurance premiums to increase by some 8% in 2025, according to a new survey from the International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans (IFEBP). That comes off a 7% price hike last year. The average annual premium for family coverage now tops $25,572, as tracked by KFF, a consultancy.

What's driving the price escalation? Catastrophic claims, specialty prescription drugs and chronic medical conditions.

"A cancer or a musculoskeletal diagnosis can result in a strong expense impact on any employer's health insurance plan," says Julie Stich, vice president of content at the IFEBP. "So can chronic conditions such as diabetes or hypertension."

A host of new specialty medications top things off.

"About a third of respondents to our recent survey reported that they now cover GLP-1 drugs for weight loss as well as diabetes," says Stich.

Companies have long tried to control costs by getting workers to pick up more of the tab. Figures in a new KFF report, though, suggest that employers are putting less faith in cost-shifting tactics.

While premiums for family coverage increased 24% over the past five years, employers have hiked worker contributions to those premiums by only 5% over the same period. Deductibles, for their part, have risen only 8% over the past five years. And copays and coinsurance payments in 2024 were no higher than the previous year.

It's no secret why employers are reluctant to load more costs onto workers' shoulders.

"Benefits are a big piece of total compensation," explained Walter Winter, senior vice president of employee benefits for Woodruff Sawyer, an independent insurance broker. "The employer who just keeps cost-shifting is going to end up with a workplace less and less attractive to employees and job candidates. Retention and recruitment may suffer."

There's also a growing realization that employee participation just kicks the health insurance can down the road.

"The old cost-shifting thing is played out," says Mike Barton, chief growth officer, employee benefits, at World Insurance, a broker. "You can increase deductibles and co-pays, and take more out of the paychecks, but that doesn't reduce the overall spend."

NEW INITIATIVES

Clearly, the business world needs some fresh paths through the health insurance wilderness. Many observers expect Washington, D.C., to provide them.

"The first Trump administration relaxed some of the regulations and tried to increase access to health care through market competition and price transparency," says Steve Kelly, partner at AZ Health Insurance Brokers. He expects similar innovation in the months ahead.

The most likely initiative to come out of Washington could be a further expansion of a fairly new insurance vehicle called the Individual Coverage Health Reimbursement Arrangement (ICHRA, pronounced "ICK-ra"). Introduced in 2020 by the first Trump administration, these arrangements allow employers of any size to reimburse participants for the premiums they pay for a health insurance plan of their choice. Employer reimbursements are tax deductible, and



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CHECKLIST: RX FOR HIGH HEALTH INSURANCE COSTS

Have you taken all the steps possible to control your company's health insurance costs? Find out by taking this quiz. Give yourself 10 points for each "Yes" answer. Then total your points to rate your performance.

- ☐ Do you look upon health insurance costs as an incoming stream of invoices that need to be analyzed?
- ☐ Do you seek out providers that will help you prioritize price transparency?
- ☐ Have you taken on the services of an adviser with underwriting experience to help select insurance vendors?
- ☐ Have you fine-tuned cost-sharing practices to balance economy and staff morale?
- ☐ Do you incentivize annual checkups and other early care?
- ☐ Do you encourage telehealth?
- ☐ Do you communicate health insurance benefits, in dollar terms, to employees?
- ☐ Have you looked into association plans as vehicles for reducing premiums?
- ☐ Have you looked into HRAs and ICHRAs as possible replacements or adjuncts to your current plan?
- ☐ Have you explored the offerings at healthcare.gov for programs that may help your company?

What's your score? Over 80: Success! You are doing a great job controlling health insurance costs. Between 60 and 80: Time to fine-tune your procedures. Below 60: It's a good idea to re-gear by instituting ideas in the accompanying article.

employees receive them tax-free.

"An ICHRA is like a 401(k) plan for health care," says Jack Hooper, CEO and co-founder of Take Command Health, a provider of health reimbursement arrangements (HRAs). "Each employee can put money toward a high-quality ACA plan that has their doctors and prescriptions covered. It's a win-win where employees are going to enjoy more value and the employer is saving money."

ICHRAs have been popular with employers, increasing in usage by some 29% in 2024 over the previous year, according to the HRA Council, a consultancy. A big reason is the flexibility they bring to the buying process.

In the traditional shopping process, employers will attempt to control overhead costs by finding a one-size-fits-all health insurance plan suitable for their diverse employee pool. Too often, that leads to overbuying, burdening the business with a plan that meets the needs of the management-level staff but is far too costly for field-level workers. And when only the sickest members of the latter group sign up for the insurance, the result is an adverse selection that sends costs into an upward spiral.

ICHRAs put a stop to that, since employers no longer need to find one plan that satisfies everyone. Too, a business need not have a huge pool of workers to benefit.

"ICHRAs can be used by the very smallest of employers, who traditionally have had trouble finding good rates and who are tired of negotiating renewals every year," says Hooper.

Despite their limited history, ICHRA plans have proved themselves capable of expanding coverage—some 83% of employers adopting them report they are offering health insurance to their workers for the first time, according to the HRA Council. And self-sufficient shopping habits are part and parcel of the new people entering the workforce.

"Younger workers seem to be just fine with going to private health providers, comparing different rates and then getting reimbursed," says Alexandra Ray, benefits manager at consultancy Flex HR.

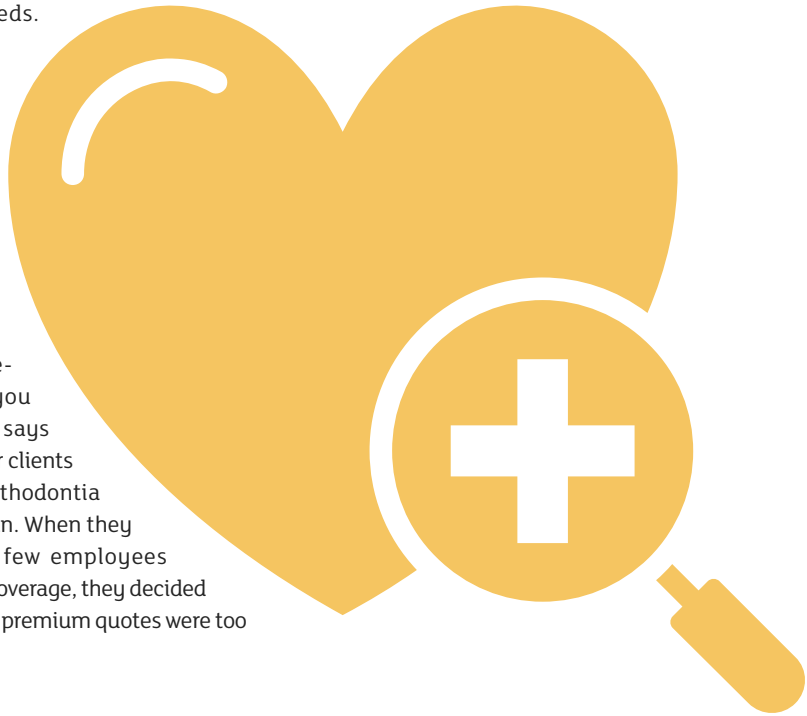
ICHRAs are just one of a variety of HRAs with which employers can fashion health insurance programs that meet diverse needs. Organizations seeking still more flexibility can add an HRA as an adjunct to, rather than a replacement for, their current plans.

"You can be very flexible and creative with how you construct HRAs," says Winter. "One of our clients wanted to add orthodontia to their dental plan. When they discovered very few employees would utilize the coverage, they decided that the increased premium quotes were too high for the expected benefit. They ended up setting up an HRA to cover orthodontia only."

JOINING FORCES

This year may also see a revival of interest in association plans that allow a consortium of employers to pool workers into one large buying group. The previous Trump administration had championed such plans as a way for employers to enjoy lower premiums.

Companies are looking for new health insurance models that will break through traditional barriers to care while capping costly fees. (Credit: elmantastic - stock.adobe.com)



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The right mix of benefits will ensure better coverage for employees while capping escalating costs. (Credit: Tartila - stock.adobe.com)

The Biden administration denigrated them, citing their tendency to default and leave beneficiaries without coverage. The new administration may well revisit the topic, under a new regulatory framework to better bolster their financial strength.

Washington could also pursue other initiatives to loosen the market. Allowing health insurance companies to sell policies across state lines, for example, could put downward pressure on premiums by increasing competition.

"We need price competition in health insurance, and we don't have it yet," says Kelly.

Increased price transparency can also help employers manage costs.

"One of the biggest limitations we have is that employers cannot get information on what it will cost to see a provider or undergo a procedure," says Kelly. "We're not getting that right now, and that's a problem."

Market observers are also looking for clues as to whether Washington will extend Biden administration tax subsidies for health coverage passed in The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and extended in the Inflation Reduction Act. Such subsidies have been giving financial incentives for employers to encourage workers to get coverage through the marketplace provided by the Affordable Care Act.

WATCHING THE TILL

Comments from consultants suggest employers are looking for new health insurance models that will break through traditional barriers to care while capping costly fees. Some observers believe employers should go further by starting to think about health care coverage less as traditional insurance to cover unlikely events and more as a separate stream of incoming invoices that will require financing—and would benefit from the same control as any business account.

"Understand that everybody in the health care system makes more money when premiums rise," says Donovan Ryckis, CEO of Ethos Benefits, a consultancy. "That includes doctors, hospitals, pharmacies and drug manufacturers. To think they're going to manage things prudently and responsibly—it's just not going to happen. Once we understand that, we can take steps to lower costs by finding more responsible vendors to price things more appropriately."

Tracking prices and negotiating for better ones requires expertise, and it behooves employers to work with service providers who understand the complexities of physician networks, coverage and benefits categories, prescription drug coverages and cost management.

"The right adviser can act as an employer advocate with the markets," says Barton. "The result can be a favorable outcome in terms of program construction, cost and performance."

The best advisers share several characteristics, noted Barton. The first is knowledge of the market. The second is a personal relationship with carriers, which can translate into better leverage and buying power.

A third characteristic, a background in underwriting, allows the adviser to deconstruct an employer's current health insurance model, break it apart and strip out waste of any kind.

"Someone with underwriting experience with the big health insurance companies knows where all the bones are buried and how to get the most out of that program for you," says Barton.

Traditionally, Barton continues, a broker will collect a bundle of information about an employer's health plans, claims history and employee census, send it to the insurance carriers and hope to get back a good rate. The knowledgeable adviser will reverse the negotiation process by working up a benefits program, constructing rates



and then going to the market and finding out which carriers will match or beat the proposed plan.

CUTTING COSTS

Employers should also take these steps to stem the rising tide of health care expenses:

Schedule early care

"Identifying medical issues early means treatment can start without delay, and that can translate into lower costs," says Barton. "Employers should consider incentivizing workers with gift cards or time off to visit their physicians for routine preventative care, immunizations and screenings."

Encourage telehealth

One-to-one video conferencing over a smartphone costs a lot less than in-person appointments. Employers need to work with their plans to ensure that telemedicine is employed as often as possible.

Shift costs

While traditional cost-shifting tactics are losing their punch as tools for capping costs, they remain an important piece of the health insurance puzzle. "We never recommend an employer pay 100% of their insurance costs," says Kelly. "That can result in employees overusing their benefits, which drives up costs for everyone."

Communicate value

"It can be helpful to include a statement on employees' pay stubs about how much the company is paying for health insurance," says Ray. "That can open a lot of people's eyes about the value they are receiving from their employer."

SELLING THE STAFF

Retooling a company's health insurance plan is one thing. Selling it to the employees is another. "Employers need to avoid rolling out a new plan in a way that makes people feel they're losing existing coverage," says Amy Skinner, director of content and brand marketing at Take Command Health. "Instead, say something like, 'We are replacing the plan that you were only lukewarm about with a new vehicle that gives you exactly what you want.' That's a powerful message that will get employees excited."

The calendar must also be used to your advantage. The more alternatives being offered to employees, the more time and hand-holding the transition will require to avoid an emotional blowback.

"Allow yourself enough runway to make a change," says Skinner. "Give your employees enough resources to make informed decisions on the new health plans. Without that, it's all too easy for people to get frustrated and end up signing up for a plan that doesn't meet their needs."

Health insurance remains a patchwork of partial solutions that employers must stitch together as best they can. The right mix of benefits will ensure better coverage for employees while capping escalating costs. And those costs need to be managed like any other business account.

"If we continue to do what we've been doing, the cost of health insurance will continue to rise unabated," says Barton. "We have to do things differently. The only way to reduce the cost of health insurance is to reduce the cost of health care." ***TS***



Health insurance remains a patchwork of partial solutions that employers must stitch together as best they can. (Credit: moremari - stock.adobe.com)



Restyling
AFTERMARKET ACCESSORIES

Lifts & Leveling Kits p. 20 / Wraps & Graphics p. 26 / Products p. 32



Interest in rooftop tents continues to soar.

BY JEF WHITE

Quality rooftop tents (RTT) offer a good night's sleep in the great outdoors. An overlanding staple and often an entryway into full vehicle customization, the units appeal to aftermarket shops looking to provide off-roaders a homey touch at their next base camp.

A variety of setups, mounting systems and features make choosing the right RTT a collaborative effort between enthusiasts and professionals. Meanwhile, their package potential creates repeat customers and promotes add-on sales.

Suppliers are here to help supply the ins and outs of the rooftop tents market, highlighting emerging trends, proven sales techniques and the latest product introductions. Take it all in because, even in the wilderness, drivers often prefer a room with a view.

WIDE AUDIENCE

These days, rooftop tents appeal to a wider audience than just dedicated overlanders.

"Many of the less-hardcore users are the most appreciative of the benefits of a hardshell rooftop tent—the tree-house view and separation from ground critters, fewer parts and less complexity for setup and teardown, and the extra wind and weather protection," says Chris Horton, senior category manager for Yakima. "All make it more comfortable than a ground tent or even a softshell tent for people that are more timid in the outdoors."

New users may believe these are complicated systems. Not so, says Kara Thrift, head of growth and marketing for iKamper.

"Our rooftop tents are easy to install, intuitive to use and appeal to a wide range of customers, from weekend warriors to families looking for simpler ways to camp," she says.

In many cases, the tents fit multiple vehicle models.

"They are not application-specific," says Charlie Mora, sales manager for Tuff Stuff Overland. "The only limiting factor is the roof rack weight capacity."

The systems also don't require specialized vehicles or tools to install, says Nupesh Patel, new product manager for Overland Vehicle Systems.

"In fact, most models—including ours—are designed for universal roof rack sys-

Room with a View



Rooftop tents don't have to be challenging to set up. (Photo courtesy Thule)



Examples and displays can build consumer confidence. (Photo courtesy Thule)

tems and can be installed with basic tools in under an hour," he says.

That's not to say they all attach the same way, however, notes Matthew Konkle, creative content managing editor for Quadratec.

"Installation depends on the vehicle's rack system, design of the tent base and even vehicle height. And sometimes that may mean special brackets or extra hardware to mount the tent, or even modification of the rack," he says. "'Universal fit' doesn't always mean 'universal ease.' Sometimes, a clean, secure fitment takes additional time and gear."

The systems may appear elaborate, but most deploy easier than expected, says Ashkan Ghashghai, sales manager, adventure camping for Thule.

"Rooftop tents don't have to be challenging to set up. Thule spends a lot of time in the R&D process figuring out how to minimize deployment time with our car tents."

Meanwhile, busy shops will be glad to hear that the latest designs often make ease of installation a priority.

"One common misconception is that rooftop tents are too difficult or time-consuming to install," says Katherine Abraham, senior manager, B2B marketing for Ironman 4x4. "Our Orion 1400, for example, includes all required heavy-duty stainless steel mounting hardware, and the slotted extrusion base rails are compatible with most crossbars, flat racks and platform roof rack

Room with a View

ROOFTOP TENTS

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** Skycamp DLX
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
The flagship Skycamp DLX delivers comfort, durability and convenience in a sleek design; sets up in under a minute; sleeps up to four on a king-size mattress; features upgraded RTT Comfort, cork flooring and integrated lighting.

iKamper
Kara Thrift
Head of Growth & Marketing

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** Orion 1400 Rooftop Tent
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
In-demand model balances rugged durability with creature comforts in a sleek, fast-deploying hardshell design; deploys in under 60 seconds; aerodynamic profile reduces drag and wind noise, even on lifted trucks and heavier builds.

Ironman 4x4
Katherine Abraham
Senior Manager, B2B Marketing

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** Alpha Hardshell
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Fully assembled and ready to install out of the box; fast, easy setup; built-in LED lighting; comfortable mattress; offered in two sizes.

Tuff Stuff Overland
Charlie Mora
Sales Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** Thule Approach
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Modern, spacious interior with panoramic skylights; sets up in under 3 minutes thanks to a unique auto-deploy design—simply unzip the travel cover and unfold the base.

Thule
Ariana Stover
PR & Communications Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** XD Everest Cantilever Aluminum Hardshell Rooftop Tent
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Available in two- and four-person options; engineered for all-season exploration; ultra-durable aluminum hardshell design; true four-season capability with premium weather-proofing; quick deployment in under 60 seconds; crossbars for gear or solar panels.

Overland Vehicle Systems
Nupesh Patel
New Product Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:** Smittybilt's Gen 2 Rooftop Tent
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Durability; expansive interior features a full-size bed with integrated mattress and sleeps three; simplistic setup/teardown with fast-fold design; utilizes 600D ripstop polyester material that protects against most conditions.

Quadratec
Matthew Konkle
Creative Content Managing Editor

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** SkyPeak HD Hardshell Tent
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Designed as a roof rack system you can sleep in; side T-slots and top crossbar kit; can carry up to 165 pounds on top and up to 75 pounds on each side; accessory attachment setup carries adventure gear; pop-out door frame expands interior shoulder space.

Yakima
Chris Horton
Senior Category Manager



Overland customers are usually prepared to spend big to get the adventure they want. (Photo courtesy Quadratec)

systems. Installation typically takes less than an hour with two technicians and doesn't require specialized tools or additional bracket kits."

PART OF A PACKAGE

An enticing trend for retailers is that rooftop tents are rarely a standalone purchase.

"It's either the thing that the customer needs to finish their epic build or the start of their epic build, so shops should expect a lot of other accessories to be requested," says Horton. "Sales will continue over a long period of time as the customer evolves or expands their needs. A hardshell tent is a path to a committed regular customer to your shop, if you have the accessories to keep bringing them in."

Abraham calls them a natural entry point

for accessory packages and future vehicle add-ons.

"Buyers who start with an RTT often return for awnings, recovery gear, lighting, drawer systems or suspension upgrades. Many also own multiple vehicles, including pickups, rock crawlers or side-by-sides, which opens the door to repeat business across multiple platforms," she says. "It's rarely a one-and-done sale—it's the beginning of a long-term customer relationship and a pipeline for high-margin accessory sales. Plus, it attracts a broader audience, helping shops diversify their builds and expand their expertise."

Patel calls RTTs a "gateway purchase to a fully built rig. Shops often see an increase in

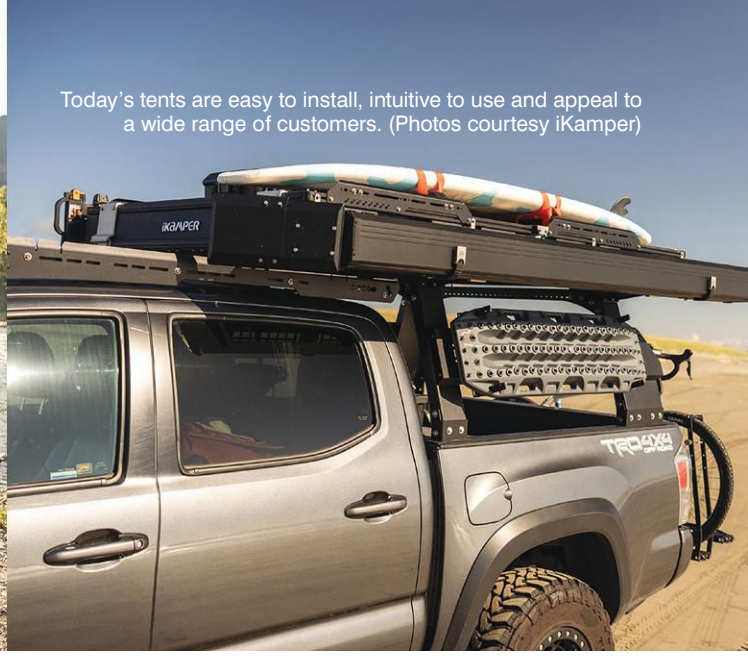


Many RTT customers are new to overlanding and making their first purchase. (Photo courtesy Tuff Stuff Overland)



Room with a View





Today's tents are easy to install, intuitive to use and appeal to a wide range of customers. (Photos courtesy iKamper)

complementary accessory sales—awnings, rack systems, lighting and cargo solutions—once customers visualize a complete overland setup."



Quality rooftop tents provide extra wind and weather protection. (Photos courtesy Yakima)

The need for a secure platform helps with package sales, notes Ghashghai.

"Rooftop tents require a sturdy roof rack system to safely carry the tent and accommodate people inside. Retailers thus become the one-stop shop for consumers to fully outfit their vehicle for an adventure camping experience, from the base rack system to the rooftop tent."

Mora highlights the upsell opportunities.

"Overlanding customers are brand loyal and want their rigs to be aesthetic and functional," he says. "Add-on sales include roof racks, awnings, shower tents, camp lighting, wheels, tires, bumpers, side steps, recovery gear and more."

Thrift notes the systems are "a high-margin product that builds loyalty and drives repeat visits. Customers who invest in an RTT often return for racks, awnings, sleep systems and other accessories."

And Konkle reveals most customers in this space are ready to spend big to get the adventure they want.

"Overlanders have plenty of disposable income. They are definitely willing to invest in quality gear and other vehicle upgrades like lift kits, larger tires, lighting and recovery gear," he notes. "So, a rooftop



JEEP PRESENTS ARTT CONCEPT BUILD



Jeep's Awning and Rooftop Tent (ARTT) concept was created in partnership with Dometic to provide an all-in-one awning and rooftop tent system. (Photo courtesy Stellantis)

Designed specifically for the four-door Jeep Wrangler, the Jeep Performance Parts (JPP) Awning and Rooftop Tent (ARTT) concept was created in partnership with Dometic to showcase an all-in-one awning and rooftop tent system.

Constructed with a carbon fiber shell, JPP officials say the aerodynamic, lightweight ARTT concept eliminates the need for a heavy roof rack system by efficiently and safely attaching directly to the Jeep Wrangler's roof.

Features include an easy-to-pitch tent using Dometic's AIR Frame Inflation technology and an integrated awning that swings out 270 degrees.

There's room for a queen-size mattress inside the tent, and the interior of the ARTT can be accessed from inside the Jeep Wrangler through removable freedom panels using a carbon fiber step that protects the center console, officials report.

"The lightweight and compact JPP Awning and Rooftop Tent concept is the perfect accessory for adventure-seeking Jeep Wrangler owners, whether they are overlanding across long distances or on a spur-of-the-moment, quick weekend getaway," says Mike Koval, senior vice president and head of sales operations, Jeep brand. "We're excited to see consumer reaction to our newest innovative concept for our enthusiast Jeep brand customers."

The new JPP ARTT system is being shown on the Jeep Wrangler 4xe Sunchaser concept that was unveiled at the 2025 Easter Jeep Safari in Moab, Utah.



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Room with a View



Rooftop tents are a natural entry point for accessory packages and future vehicle add-ons. (Photos courtesy Ironman 4x4)



tent purchase can easily spin into several additional purchases and present the ability for plenty of return visits."

TELLING THE RTT STORY

In many cases, the products can literally sell themselves—once consumers are aware of their availability.

"To be successful in the rooftop tent category, consumers must see the product in store to gain confidence in making a purchase," says Thule's Ghashghai.

Overlanders will want to experience all the systems have to offer.

"The tent has to be set up and accessible. People have to see the inside and, ideally, get in it," says Horton from Yakima. "Tell a story with the display. Put some sleeping bags in there and a book, and plug in the interior lights that come with the tent. Set up other add-on accessories like air conditioners, crossbar kits, etc. If it's on a vehicle, add an awning or boat rack up top, and have a large ground mat with a couple of chairs ready. Show the customer what their camp is capable of—spur their imagination."

Quadratec's Konkle recommends setting up all of the accessories as well, including ladders and awnings.

"This kind of display lets a potential customer climb inside the tent and feel out the space, visualize the setup process and determine if it will work on their vehicle," he says.

Abraham from Ironman 4x4 encourages shops to install a demo RTT on a shop truck or other easily accessible vehicle.

"When customers can touch it, climb inside and see how quickly it sets up, they're much more likely to buy," she notes. "And

it's even better if you pair it with a seasonal install promo or bundle it with other gear. Make sure your staff is trained on the key features, because a confident, knowledgeable sales pitch can go a long way in converting interest into sales."

Tuff Stuff Overland's Mora says the in-person experience is invaluable to a successful sale.

"Overlanding is an ever-growing industry. Most customers walking through your door will be new to overlanding and making their first purchase. They'll have done their research online, but want to be sure they are making the right decision," he says. "Being able to touch the material, climb inside and get a feel for the tent will help make them feel confident with their purchase."



Shops often see an increase in complementary accessory sales once customers visualize a complete overland setup. (Photos courtesy Overland Vehicle Systems)

Focus on simplicity and the fun waiting to be had, says Patel from Overland Vehicle Systems.

"Let customers experience the tent. A live demo or in-store display showing ease of setup and interior features helps close the sale. Also, positioning RTTs as a lifestyle upgrade, not just camping gear, drives emotional buy-in."

The idea, says iKamper's Thrift, is to "make it tangible. Set one up in your showroom or at events so people can see and climb inside. Once customers experience the quality and simplicity firsthand, it's an easier sale. And don't forget to train your team on how to speak to the lifestyle, not just the product specs." ***TS***





Reliable, well-made components can help avoid costly repairs or future replacements. (Photo courtesy RSO Suspension)

ON THE RISE

PART II

Taking lift & leveling kit sales to the next level.

BY JEF WHITE



The wrong setup can lead to a rough ride or underwhelming trail performance. (Photo courtesy RSO Suspension)

Editor's note: This is the second half of a two-part article highlighting the lift and leveling kits market. Part I, featuring additional manufacturers and suppliers, appeared in the June 2025 print issue of THE SHOP magazine and online at theshopmag.com.

When customers want to take their off-road and overlanding trucks and SUVs to the next level, one modification rises above the rest—lift and leveling kits.

A must-have add-on for vehicles with oversized wheel-and-tire combos, the kits hit the sweet spot for aftermarket shops by being just complex enough that many enthusiasts turn to professionals for purchasing and installation assistance, while not being so complicated that they eat up too many hours in the work bay.

Offering a noticeable appearance upgrade, the kits can also deliver steering, ride quality and drivability benefits for hardworking vehicles. For a deeper look at a market that's riding high, suppliers offer insights on outside influences, sales tips and hot new products.

MULTIPLE BENEFITS

Many off-roaders and overlanders gravitate toward lift and leveling kits because they know the systems deliver real benefits and look good doing it.

"Customers have a desire to get out and explore, paired with wanting a great-looking truck," says Jerry Zaiden, vice president of strategic partnerships for MagnaFlow Group and its Camburg Engineering brand.

Different consumers will value features differently. Regardless of whether they're driving a hardcore 4x4 or a mall crawler; however, Jesse Brown, vice president of operations for RSO Suspension, cautions against going too extreme unless the use case absolutely calls for it.

"Some shops sell oversized lift kits based on appearance alone, without taking into account how the customer plans to use the vehicle—whether it's for commuting, towing or hitting the trails," he says. "This often results in poor ride quality, reduced fuel



Customers have a desire to get out and explore in a great-looking truck. (Photo courtesy Camburg Engineering/MagnaFlow)

efficiency or disappointing off-road performance. The wrong setup can lead to a rough ride, worse gas mileage or underwhelming trail performance, leading to customer dissatisfaction."

Most kits are paired with new, usually larger, wheels and tires. Rising costs can force consumers to delay purchases.

"The most popular tire brands in the most desired sizes can be over $400 each," says Trina Hemann, marketing manager for RealTruck. "The total cost of lifting your truck or SUV has certainly increased, so consumers are rethinking the size of their lift or even if they should lift at all."

Kits also need to work with the latest innovations introduced on new vehicles.

"Trucks are becoming increasingly complex with multilink suspensions, active ride systems and integrated driver-assist tech, so lift systems can't just be 'good enough,'" says Katherine Abraham, senior manager, B2B marketing for Ironman 4x4. "Shops need kits that preserve electronic stability control calibration, ride height sensors and factory alignment specs. At the same time, consumers want form and function, larger tires, increased stance and a better look, without giving up drivability or triggering warning lights."

Meanwhile, demand for less-expensive options is also increasing, says Sara Ford, marketing manager for TrailFX.

"In today's challenging economic environment, many consumers are being more cautious with their discretionary spending," she says. "As a result, buyers who might have previously opted for a full lift kit are now leaning toward more budget-friendly, moderate leveling kits."



Quality options can greatly improve a lift kit's performance. (Photo courtesy RealTruck/SuperLift)

LIFTS & LEVELING KITS

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** Camburg Performance Series Suspension Systems
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Can be paired with most aftermarket coil-overs for off-road performance; billet upper control arms paired with the all-new X-Joint XL sealed race series ball joints; made with 4340 heat-treated alloy steel.

Camburg Engineering
A MagnaFlow Group brand
Jerry Zaiden
VP Strategic Partnerships, MagnaFlow Group

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** IRONMAN 4X4 Lift & Level Kit Line
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Popular platforms include Ford F-150, Toyota Tacoma and Ram 1500; kits engineered for precise fitment and optimal geometry retention with up to 3.5 inches of lift; CNC-machined billet aluminum spacers; bonded rubber bushings in upper control arms.

Ironman 4X4
Katherine Abraham
Senior Manager, B2B Marketing

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** 3-inch Lift Kits
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Available for 2019-25 Silverado 4WD applications; offer multiple shock options including Fox and King coil-overs.

RealTruck
Trina Hemann
Marketing Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:** 2.5-inch Stage 3.1 Lift Kit for Jeep JL
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Comprehensive kit features front and rear adjustable reservoir shocks that are fully rebuildable; also includes front lower adjustable control arms, front adjustable forged track bar, rear track bar relocation bracket, front and rear coil springs and more.

RSO Suspension
Jesse Brown
VP of Operations

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** TrailFX 1-inch to 2-inch Leveling Kits
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Durable CNC-machined components made from billet aluminum or steel; engineered to eliminate ball joint, tie rod and steering bind while maintaining factory alignment specs; simple installation with no cutting or drilling required; hardware included.

TrailFX
Sara Ford
Marketing Manager

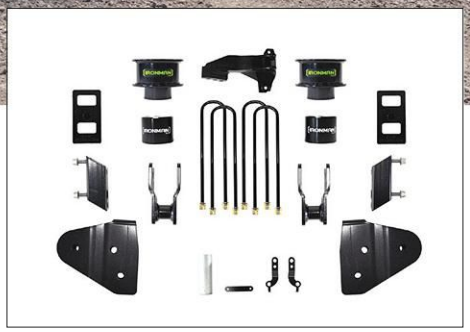
ON THE RISE PART II



Focus on the performance benefits of quality lift and leveling kits. (Photos courtesy Ironman 4x4)







QUALITY BUILDS CONFIDENCE

Regardless of how they use them, consumers take real pride in their off-road and overland vehicles, so it makes sense they would choose quality products over a lower price tag. It's a tendency worth remembering during the sales process, suppliers note.

A common mistake Zaiden sees is that "most shops push lower-end, cheap spacers over high-quality suspensions."

Hemann calls it a matter of quality versus cost.

"Most of our lift kits offer a higher-end shock absorber like Bilstein, Fox or King. These do come with a higher price tag, but these options can greatly improve the lift kit's performance," she says. "The improved performance can increase the likelihood of a repeat lift kit customer. If a customer buys a less-expensive lift and has a poor experience, the chances of that customer lifting their next ride is very slim."

With many suppliers entering the market, knowing the products shops carry is very important.

"One of the biggest mistakes is assuming a spacer is a spacer. The truth is, poorly engineered kits can throw off geometry, increase bump steer and accelerate ball joint and tie rod wear," says Abraham. "We've seen examples of inadequate camber correction or spacer materials that don't meet proper tolerance specs, leading to ride complaints, uneven tire wear or alignment headaches. Our kits avoid this with a systems-based design approach."

Ford says the best decisions are made

Offering a noticeable appearance upgrade, lift kits can also deliver steering, ride quality and drivability benefits for hardworking vehicles. (Photo by Jef White)





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ON THE RISE PART II



High-quality kits feature reliable components and proven designs that improve performance and appearance while making room for larger wheels and tires. (Photo by Jef White)

when shops consider the client's needs, driving habits and budget.

"Customers often walk in asking for a specific brand they've seen online or heard of from friends, but that doesn't always mean it's the best fit for their vehicle or intended use," she explains. "By not exploring other options, shops can miss the opportunity to recommend a kit that offers better performance, easier installation or greater value."

It always pays to deliver value, says Brown.

"With the current economic uncertainty, many consumers are understandably cautious about making large purchases, especially upgrades like suspension kits," he explains. "That's why it's more important than ever to invest in quality parts from the start. Choosing reliable, well-made components can help you avoid costly repairs or replacements later."

SENSIBLE SELLING

Zaiden from Camburg/MagnaFlow reiterates the process of highlighting performance over price.

"Sell higher-quality suspension systems," he recommends. "They are less likely to come back with issues, and they cost more so there's more profit for the shop. People want quality over cheap."

Abraham from Ironman 4x4 suggests focusing on the performance benefits.

"Start by framing it as a precision suspension upgrade and not just a cosmetic lift. When you speak to the engineered value, alignment integrity, high-strength materials, anticorrosion finishes and easy install, you differentiate from low-end competitors that cause more problems than they solve," she says. "Also, invest in staff training. The more your team understands how to explain things like UCA pivot angles or preload stack tolerances, the more confidently they can close the sale."

Education goes a long way, notes RealTruck's Hemann, allowing shops to find the right fit for each customer's unique needs.

"The customer may have already made their mind up on what product they want before they even come into the shop because of what they read online. You need to ask questions to make sure they are not heading down the wrong path," she advises. "It could be that the tires and wheels they desire do not work with the lift they thought they needed. Ask questions about their driving habits, like is it a daily driver, weekend warrior, etc. Properly educating the customer will gain their trust."

The lift category can be "polarizing," she continues, furthering the importance of professional knowledge to find the right fit.

"Word of mouth and social media are huge factors in this category. Become known as the go-to shop because you did what was right for the customer and your sales will increase," says Hemann.

Having products in-house and ready to install helps customers get what they want, when they want it, says Ford from TrailFX.

"Keep popular leveling kits in stock—especially for newer and high-demand truck and SUV models. Leveling kits are compact, relatively affordable and easy to store, making them ideal for quick-turn sales," she says. "When a customer comes in looking for a suspension upgrade, having the right application on hand can be the deciding factor between making the sale or losing it to an online competitor."

Shops can also gain an edge over competitors by doing all they can to help consumers get into the proper system—even if it takes a while.

"Not everyone has the cash upfront for a lift or leveling kit, even if they really want one," says Brown from RSO Suspension. "Giving your customers flexible payment options can make all the difference in helping them say 'yes' without stretching their wallet." ***TS***





The best decisions are made when shops consider the client's needs, driving habits and budget. (Photos courtesy TrailFX)

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North Carolina's Atlantic Wraps originally started as a pinstriping company that later branched out into vinyl wraps and graphics. (Photo courtesy Mike Montemurro/Atlantic Wraps)

Wraps & GRAPHICS in Three Acts

Meet a trifecta of wraps & graphics professionals that have their markets covered.

Blending Pinstriping & Vehicle Wraps

ARTICLE PROVIDED BY AVERY DENNISON

You could say that talent, attention to detail, patience, work ethic and devotion to quality run through the Montemurro family's DNA. After all, those are just a few of the traits needed for pinstriping.

That's where Mike Montemurro's story begins, when he started a mobile pinstriping and hand lettering business. He offered his craft to vehicle owners and businesses, turning ordinary surfaces into unique works of art.

Over the years, he recognized a growing need to provide an option to customers who didn't have the time or budget to invest in a hand-painted customization. So, in 2013, he enlisted his son, Michael, to help start and develop an arm of the business devoted to vinyl.

These days, Atlantic Wraps has grown into a family affair: Michael's mom, Laura, and sister, Annelise, handle Atlantic's quoting and lead the front office. The team also includes a receptionist, a media coordinator, two graphic designers, two paint protection film installers and three vehicle wrap installers (in addition to Michael).

Mike remains very involved, leading a team of three pinstriping technicians with a mobile service.

Inside the Atlantic facility is an array of vinyl wrap production equipment including three Graphtec cutting plotters, a Summa F-Series flatbed cutter, a Summa vinyl plotter and cutter, three Roland TrueVIS VG3 eco-solvent printers and a KALA wide-format laminator.

Besides commercial vehicle/fleet wrapping, cut graphics, color-change and paint protection, the company also provides wall graphics. Having design, production and printing capabilities in-house, in addition to installation, means Atlantic can provide a virtually turnkey experience to its clients.

PRODUCT MIX

Having evolved from its relatively modest beginnings, Atlantic Wraps now operates





The shop offers a variety of graphics products and services to provide clients with a turnkey experience. (Photos courtesy Mike Montemurro/Atlantic Wraps)



Atlantic Wrap's client, The Roof Medic, wanted all-satin everything on its trucks, including the window graphics. Using Avery Dennison films, the team templated the windows and made a file with 1/8-inch strips cut out. The result is an image that appears on the window, but anyone in the truck can still see through it. (Photos courtesy of The Roof Medic/ @theroofmedic)

out of an 8,000-square-foot facility in the Charlotte suburb of Matthews, North Carolina. The shop chooses vinyl from multiple manufacturers, including Avery Dennison.

For vehicle customization and fleet wraps, Michael Montemurro and his team often spec Avery Dennison MPI 1105 Easy Apply RS Supercast Digital Wrapping Film, a premium cast film that offers high-end 3D conformability, printability and durability. Atlantic often pairs MPI 1105 with Avery Dennison DOL 1360 Max High Gloss digital overlaminate.

"We really appreciate the extended durability of that combo," says Montemurro. "It costs a little bit more per roll. But at the end of the day, if you're not going to have a customer coming back with, say, a cracked hood that has to be removed in little, tiny pieces, then it's completely worth it."

For vehicle wrapping and color-change, Atlantic often turns to Avery Dennison Supreme Wrapping Film, a premium-quality cast vinyl film portfolio that offers a paint-like finish in a variety of colors.

"We're only going to use premium cast vinyl," says Montemurro. "I don't really mess around with the calendered or hybrid films. We value the ease of application, longevity and clean removability of a product like Supreme Wrapping Film."

Atlantic's dedication to quality stems from the detail-oriented craft of pinstriping.

"I always tell our installers to stop and regroup if there's something they see that just isn't right," he says. "I want them to ask themselves, 'Would you be happy with this? Would you pay for this?' Because, at the end of the day, that's what the customer is going to think. Look, there will often be things that need to be fixed or adjusted. So, it's important that we identify those issues up front and make sure that what goes out the door represents the quality we're known for."

SATIN-WRAPPED WINDOWS

Atlantic's social media pages and website (atlanticcustomwraps.com) offer a photographic record of what happens when quality design, materials and people come together to transform vehicles. One recent project stands out.

"We had a request from a local roofing company," Montemurro says. "They wanted all-satin everything on their trucks, printed with as little overlay as possible. And then they wanted graphic windows—like, perforated graphics—but all satin and matching the rest of the design. But obviously you can't laminate windows in satin, because you won't be able to see through them."

The team's solution? Template the windows and make a file with 1/8-inch strips cut out. The result is that the image still appears on the window, but anyone in the truck can still see through it.

"They came out awesome," says Montemurro. "We've done numerous trucks for this company, and it's always fun seeing them on the road. I say, 'Ah, we did that!'"

Montemurro is an Avery Dennison Certified Wrap Installer. The company also hosts Avery Dennison vehicle wrap training at its facility.

"It's great for networking and for meeting other installers that you might otherwise never meet," he says. "I like the chance to get to know the people from Avery Dennison even better. Having that face time with people in the organization is important to us. And, of course, we can put our own people in those valuable classes without them having to travel. That's a big plus, too."





Former firefighter Rickey Johnson of Pevely, Missouri, started Precision Graphics & Signs as a side business in 2005. (Photos courtesy Roland DG)



Former Firefighter Delivers Graphics for First Responders

ARTICLE PROVIDED BY ROLAND DG

It's a full-circle story. Rickey Johnson of Pevely, Missouri, began his firefighting career as a volunteer in 1997 and was later hired full-time by his local fire department. Like many firefighters, he had a side hustle—a sign shop called Precision Graphics & Signs.

After suffering effects of COVID-19, Johnson gave up his firefighting career and focused on sign making. Today, his shop is located in the old firehouse that his former fire department occupied for decades, and his firefighting colleagues are among his long list of clients.

Johnson reflects on how sign making complemented his first responder career, the mix of products that brought his company success and the importance of top-of-the-line equipment for quality output.

Tell us why you decided to start Precision Graphics & Signs.

RICKEY JOHNSON: I used to work for a fire apparatus dealer who needed someone to install striping and graphics. After learning how to do that, I realized graphics could be a sideline for me while I continued my career as a firefighter. I founded Precision Graphics & Signs in 2005.

Tell us about your company's growth. Are you still in the location where you started?

RJ: Our company started out in a very small, 300-square-foot office. We performed all of our installations either outside or off-site at the customer's location. In 2010, we moved into a larger warehouse-type shared facility, which we outgrew in just a few years.

In 2020, we moved to our current shop, which measures 4,000 square feet. It was originally built as a firehouse in 1956 and was occupied by my old department for many years. It was added on to in 1981 and again in 1987, later sold and then turned into an auto repair shop. Now our shop is in part of that building. It's a great location in the center of town.

How is your shop set up?

RJ: We are staffed with an office manager, two installers and me. Our shop offers vehicle graphics and wraps; indoor and outdoor signage; window, wall and floor graphics; yard signs; banners; and stickers.

We do a lot of work for fire departments, EMS and police departments. Almost all of our other customers are commercial accounts, from construction to retail, and most of them are local to our city and the greater St. Louis area.

Is fleet graphics a big part of the work you do?

RJ: Yes, fleet graphics is a big part of our business. We currently service our county sheriff's department and county government vehicles, as well as other first responder teams. We have wrapped every type of vehicle, from big to small, long to short.

Do you do any print-and-ship work?

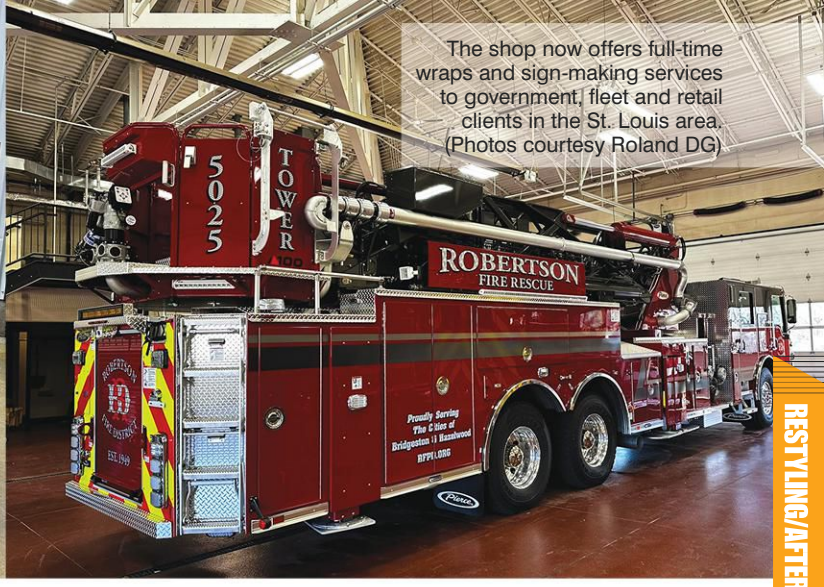
RJ: Yes, we do print-and-ship work currently, and this is an area of our business that we'd like to expand.

What print production equipment are you using and why?

RJ: I've used Roland DG equipment from the start, beginning with a 30-inch VersaCAMM printer/cutter, then a SOLJET and now the TrueVIS line. I've also had a Roland DG cutter.

I currently have the Roland DG TrueVIS XP-640 64-inch large-format eco-solvent





The shop now offers full-time wraps and sign-making services to government, fleet and retail clients in the St. Louis area. (Photos courtesy Roland DG)

printer set up with eight colors: CMYK, light black, orange and green. The new, wider ink gamut has provided us with excellent color management capability and vibrant output. It's also easy to use and extremely productive, allowing us to deliver all of our products, including vehicle wraps, faster than ever before.

To me, Roland DG is the Cadillac of printers. These are high-quality machines inside and out—they're ultrareliable, solid as a rock and they hold their resale value. On top of that, the sales and service we get from our Roland dealer, Shillers, is the best.

Printing is a competitive industry—why do you think your clients choose Precision Graphics & Signs?

RJ: We have always provided superior quality. We stand behind our work and someone always answers the phone. We've also developed a good reputation over the years and people know they can count on the work that we do.

What lies ahead for your business?

RJ: We would like to continue to grow our business in our current location. With our top-of-the-line equipment and talented staff members, we know we can meet or exceed our clients' expectations. We're not necessarily trying to be the biggest shop; we're just trying to be the best.

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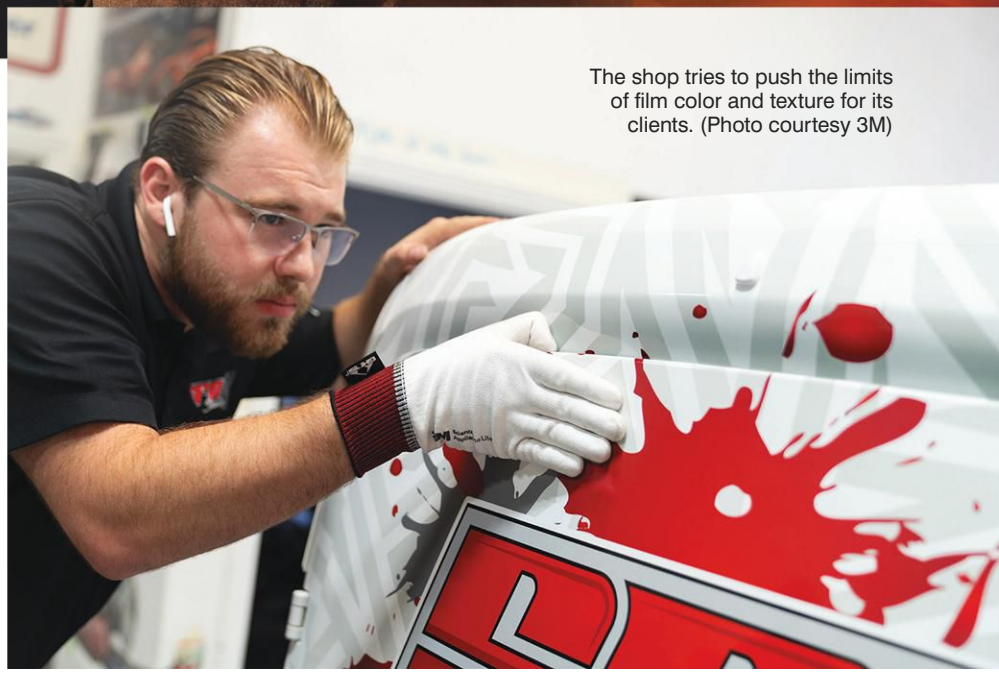
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SCAN FOR A FREE SAMPLE



John “Sticky” Meehan, founder of Sticky Fingers Design Studio in Huntington Beach, California, shares his story of perseverance in a video produced by 3M. (Photo courtesy 3M)



The shop tries to push the limits of film color and texture for its clients. (Photo courtesy 3M)

‘Sticky’ Shares Life & Wraps Lessons in Video

BY JEF WHITE

Calling himself the “luckiest unlucky guy I know,” John “Sticky” Meehan, founder of Sticky Fingers Design Studio (SFDS) in Huntington Beach, California, has used a mix of passion, patience and perseverance to build a successful wraps and graphics company.

Having overcome cancer three times by the age of 50 and the sudden passing of his father, Meehan knows a thing or two about daunting challenges and facing adversity. Yet, his lows have been balanced by plenty of exciting opportunities over the years, including a chance to do paint work for John Force and Mickey Thompson, spending three-and-a-half years with a Toyota INDYCAR team and, ultimately, blending his artistic abilities and dogged determination to keep SFDS going as it blossomed into a full-service wraps and vinyl graphics shop.

Meeting his wife along the way, who’s now also become his business partner, Meehan remains optimistic and grateful—so much so that he’s telling his story in a 6-minute video hosted by film supplier 3M titled “Born to Defy Expectations.”

In it, Meehan shares not only his business ideas but also his positive outlook on life.

“Sticky walks us through how the numerous opportunities he had to explore his passion for racing and customization propagated through partnerships with some of professional racing’s finest teed him up for a lifelong career with wraps,” 3M officials state in an email introducing the video. “Though he also faced many challenges throughout his career that would have made most others quit, he never let the passing of family members or serious health issues stop him. Time and time again, he pulled himself up by the bootstraps, reinvented



SFDS has blossomed into a full-service wraps and vinyl graphics shop. (Photos courtesy 3M)

himself and started up his shop again. We are proud that he has chosen to stick with 3M no matter what."

Through it all, Meehan explains that failure was never an option.

"I was definitely driven more by the idea that the naysayers would be right. That 'quitting is for quitters.' I would be a fool not to ride this wave all the way to shore," he says in the video. "The best I can say is that everyone in life is dealt a hand and you have to play your hand. To not play your hand is to quit before you even start."

He's thankful for the help and support he's received along the way, including his longtime association with 3M.

"Any time you want to succeed, you have to surround yourself with good people and good partnerships," he says. "While I'm trying to push the limits of film in colors and texture and all kinds of different things for my clients, I can count on 3M doing their job and making a better film for me to work with. I couldn't ask for more."

With his son now also showing interest in the craft, Meehan notes his new dream is to "maybe have Sticky Fingers Design live beyond me."

Regardless of what happens, however, he's always looking to tomorrow.

"What's not exciting about the future? Everything is exciting about the future," he says. "There's a new generation of wrappers that I get to teach, that other people get to teach—boy, is it exciting times."

See the full video online at 3m.com and on YouTube. **TS**





RESTYLING PRODUCTS

Parts To Accessorize Any Ride



4Runner Taillights

ORACLE Lighting, Metairie, Louisiana, presents its new Flush-Style (Lensless) LED Taillights for 2014-23 Toyota 4Runner applications. Designed for a sleek, modern look and enhanced functionality, the taillights offer a bold aesthetic and improved illumination. Low-profile styling significantly reduces protrusion, providing a streamlined appearance while minimizing damage risk. The patent-pending lensless design incorporates high-powered reverse lights, a signature perimeter lighting band and a dynamic sequential turn signal function.

New Overlaminate

Avery Dennison Graphics Solutions, Mentor, Ohio, introduces its DOL 7460 Digital Overlaminate, designed to set a new standard in graphics protection. Offering a sustainable, eco-friendly solution for longer-lasting printed graphics, the overlaminate is engineered with ADReva technology for improved conformability and durability. Solvent- and PVC-free, DOL 7460 pairs with the company's MPI 1105 or MPI 1405 digitally printable films and performs well in hot, dry and UV-intense climates. Applications include fleet and vehicle graphics.





UJV300DTF-75 Printer

Mimaki USA, Flowery Branch, Georgia, presents its UJV300DTF-75 printer, a UV-DTF (direct-to-film) model for easy transfer to large or unusually shaped surfaces. Fusing UV printing technology with a newly developed film transport system and next-generation inks to expand the possibilities of the made-to-order goods business, UV-DTF is a transfer printing method using a dedicated film. The 25-inch (650mm) wide printer is offered along with new Mimaki original UV-LED ELS-170 inks in black, cyan, magenta and yellow, and ELG-100 ink in white/clear.

High-Speed Eco-Solvent Printer



Roland DGA Corp., Irvine, California, presents the next-generation XP-640 Pro-level 64-inch Eco-Solvent Inkjet Printer, the latest in its TrueVIS series. Newly designed dual staggered printheads eject finer ink droplets at higher densities to produce vibrant, detailed graphics with fewer passes. New high-speed data control functionality further enhances printhead performance, enabling print speeds of up to 818 square feet per hour. New TH eco-solvent inks now include a new red ink option, allowing users to achieve the highest accuracy with red and orange expression.



Off-Road Wheel

Method Race Wheels, Santa Fe Springs, California, introduces the all-new 709 HD Bead Grip Wheel, engineered for off-road performance. Featuring patented Bead Grip technology, the wheel delivers tire security even in the harshest terrain. Built with heavy-duty load ratings across all applications, it's designed to handle both extreme weight and rugged landscapes with confidence. An optional Forged Impact Ring protects the wheel lip from severe impacts and allows for visual customization to suit any rig.



Versatile Off-Road Tire

AMP Tires, Ontario, California, part of **The Wheel Group**, presents the AMP Terrain Attack R/T tire featuring two distinct sidewall options. Designed for performance and durability without compromising on-road comfort, Terrain Attack tires are built to grip harder and last longer. An innovative tread design optimizes road contact and reduces road noise.



E-Bike Rack

Küat Racks, Springfield, Missouri, presents the feature-packed Piston ION E-Bike Rack. Offering a 100-pounds-per-tray capacity and zero frame contact, the racks includes an aluminum ramp for easy loading and a FastFit tool-free wheel chock system that quickly and intuitively adjusts to different tire sizes. Compatible with RVs and approved for off-road use, the rack system can be chassis-mounted and also fits 2-inch hitch receivers. It folds up and down with a simple foot pedal.

Jeep/Bronco Automatic Convertible Soft Top



Bestop, Louisville, Colorado, introduces the eTop Automatic Convertible Soft Top, available for 2021-25 Ford Bronco four-door, 2018-25 Jeep Wrangler JL four-door and 4xe, and 2007-18 Jeep Wrangler JK models. Delivering open-air freedom at the push of a button, eTop is designed for all-weather performance, featuring nine-layer insulation for superior temperature and noise control. The advanced soft top is powered by durable, German-engineered **Bosch** motors.



Toyota Progressive Load Support

SuperSprings International, Carpinteria, California, presents its SSR-634-40/47 SumoSprings kits, including new applications for Toyota models. Built to support the latest models with progressive load support and zero maintenance, current fitments include 2024-up Toyota Tacoma 4x2 and 4x4, 2023-up Toyota Sequoia 4x2 and 4x4, 2024-up Toyota Land Cruiser 250 4x4, 2021-up Toyota Land Cruiser 300 4x4 and 2021-up Lexus LX600 4x4 applications. Handmade from microcellular polyurethane, SumoSprings reduce rear-end sag and increase load carrying ability.



Sprinter Lift Kit

Van Compass, Rathdrum, Idaho, presents its Stage 5 System 2-Inch Lift with Adjustable Rally Struts for 2019-up Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 2500 two-wheel drive van models. Building on top of the stability and compliance added from the company's non-lift systems, the innovative Striker 2-inch lift kit includes all the necessary components to properly increase ride height, allowing room for larger tires while delivering a more aggressive stance and improving overall ground clearance.

Mid-Height Rack



Overland Vehicle Systems (OVS), Santa Fe Springs, California, presents its new Mid-Height Rack. Built to fit both mid- and full-size trucks, the rack is designed with more than 100 mounting positions, allowing users to securely attach essential gear such as recovery boards, fuel cans, shovels, tents, lighting and more. Featuring a carbon steel structure and V-brace reinforcement, it is designed to endure the rigors of the trail with a no-drill installation. The rack has a dynamic weight capacity of 400 pounds and a static weight capacity of up to 700 pounds.

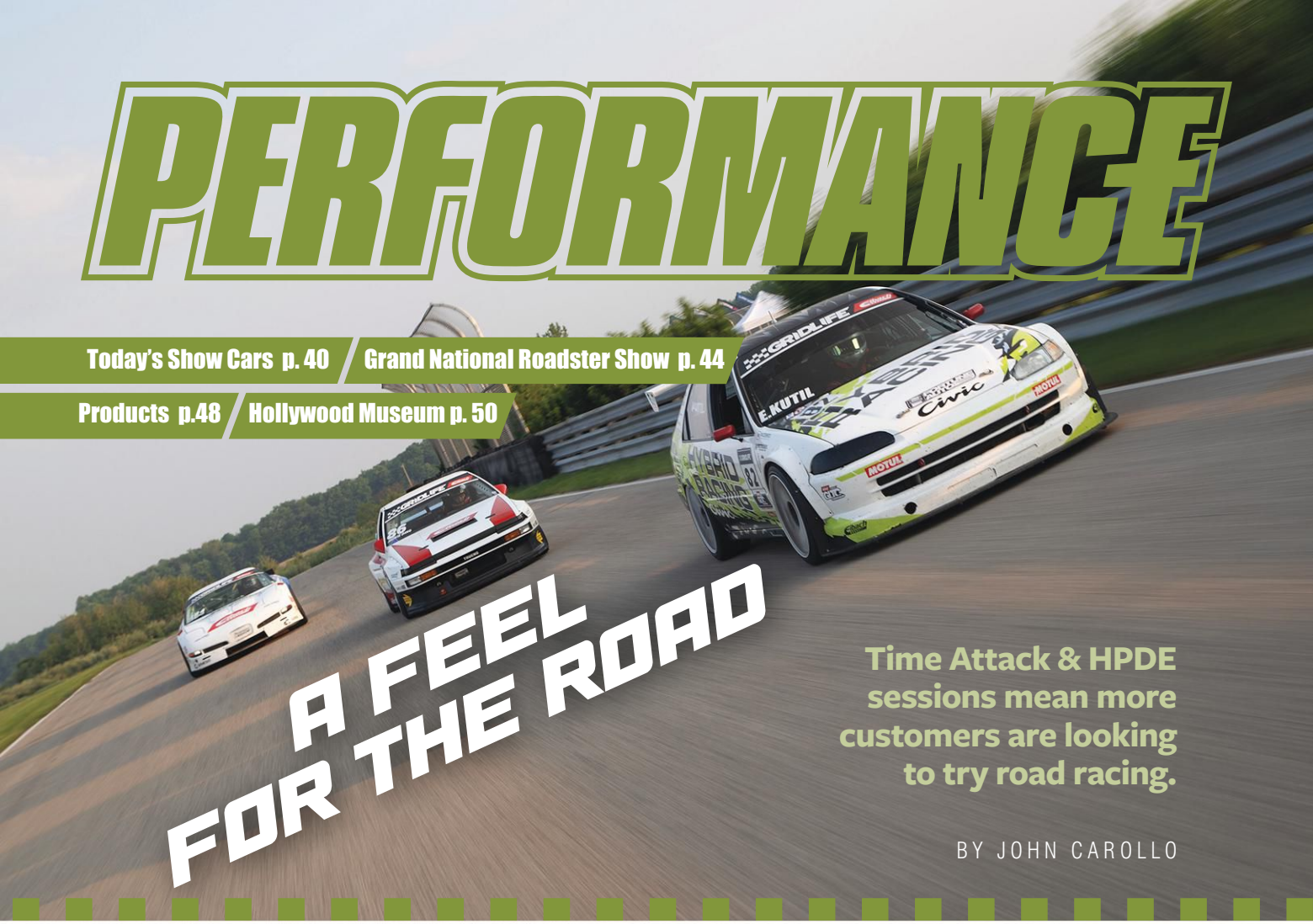


Receiver Lock Pin

BOLT Lock, Milwaukee, presents a new, 3-inch-long, 5/8-inch-diameter stainless steel Receiver Lock to fit heavy-duty and super duty pickup truck models with Class III, Class IV and Class V hitches equipped with either a 2.5- or a 3-inch square receiver. The receiver lock has a plate tumbler sidebar to prevent picking and bumping while its stainless steel lock shutter keeps out dirt and moisture. The system features the company's patented one-key lock technology, which allows the lock to be permanently programmed to the vehicle's ignition key. ***TS***

PERFORMANCE

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A FEEL FOR THE ROAD

Time Attack & HPDE sessions mean more customers are looking to try road racing.

BY JOHN CAROLLO

Time Attack and High Performance Driver Education (HPDE) sessions are just two of the many trends that are enticing more and more gearheads of all abilities to try their hand at road racing.

With a class or category for any year, make or model, these types of track day events provide opportunities for racers to test the limits of their driving abilities while putting their favorite vehicle through its paces on a closed circuit. The good news for shops is that sometimes that means broken parts, and other times a strong desire for upgrades to improve performance and safety.

More competitors mean a growing market with more knowledge to gain and more pitfalls to avoid. Road racing parts suppliers offer their observations on market trends, sales tips and a few new products to give local racers the winning edge.

IN-RACE ADJUSTMENTS

Embraced by a new generation of enthusiasts, road racing is seemingly more popular than ever.

"As the sponsor of the Eibach GLTC (GRIDLIFE Touring Cup) Championship, we've seen livestream technology and YouTube televised road race events bring a lot of attention to this form of motorsports," says Mark Krumme, head of marketing, North America, for Eibach. "Because there's more and more growth, a lot of companies are investing more in technology and drivers are investing more in their projects and vehicles. With that comes performance improvements, such as advancements in race tires and 3D rapid prototyping of aero components, creating a need for suspension solutions that can handle the increased grip."

Keep high-demand parts in stock to serve the last-minute needs of road racers. (Photo courtesy Eibach)

The sport is known for competitive adjustments and innovations. As such, product technology advances year after year.



Higher power levels, faster lap times and a greater demand for reliability under extreme conditions is driving the road racing market. (Photo courtesy Advanced Clutch Technology)



Road racing allows racers to test the limits of their driving abilities while putting their favorite vehicle through its paces on a closed circuit, such as at the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb. (Photos courtesy OPTIMA Batteries)

"For us here at Red Line Oil, it's all about staying ahead of the changes and lubricant requirements. As engine and car technology have changed, especially in the more modern platforms, engines often aren't as stressed from an rpm standpoint, but factory forced induction (and modification of those systems) adds more load," says Mark Beatty, brand director. "So, engines are designed to last longer but can be pushed harder, which adds significant lubricant and coolant requirements. Additionally, with the additional power potential and technologies like direct injection fueling, which allows higher operating temps, quality engine fluids have never been more important."

When it comes to competition batteries, Jim McIlvaine, eCare manager for OPTIMA Batteries, says more racers are looking to lightweight lithium batteries to help reduce vehicle weight.

"They are often capable of doing this more effectively, for less cost, than many carbon fiber replacement components and body panels," he says.

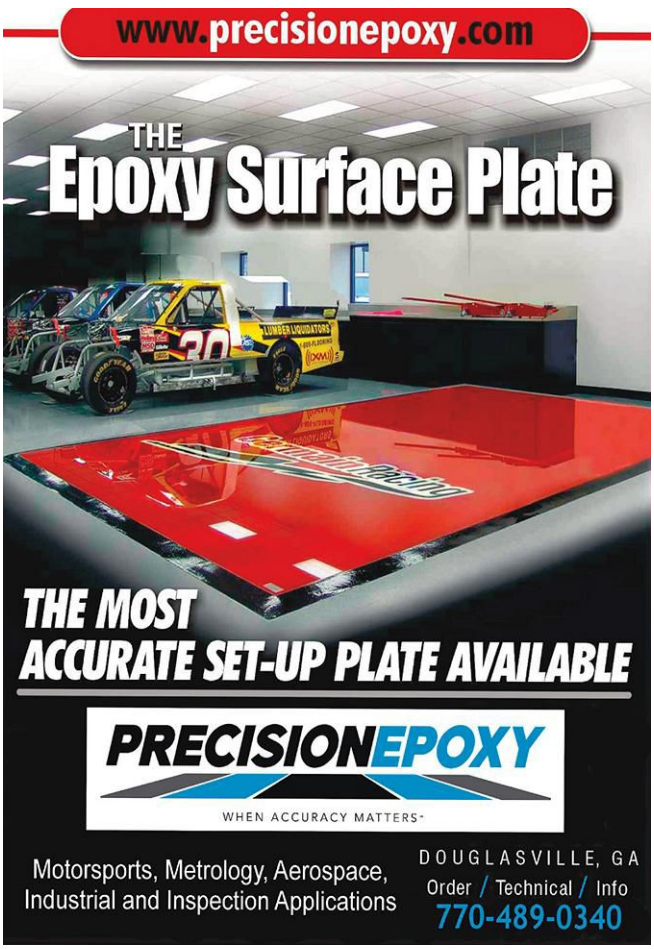
Dave Brzozowski, motorsports manager at Wilwood Engineering, see tires with more grip, coupled with advancements in damper/shock technology.

"Cars are going quicker, easier, so the demand for all aspects of braking performance is critical," he explains.





Offer products and services that appeal to road racers and performance enthusiasts. (Photo courtesy Malco Products)



ROAD RACING PRODUCTS

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
225mm & 10.5-Inch Mod-Twin Clutch Kits
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Instead of stages, kits rated by actual torque capacity at the crank; choice of heavy-duty organic kits for street use or cerametallic puck-style kits for race applications—available in Heavy Duty, Xtreme and Maxx Xtreme configurations.

Advanced Clutch Technology (ACT)
Rich Barsamian
Vice President of Sales & Marketing

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Race Springs in Metric Sizes
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Between 1,500-1,700 race spring models available in different diameters and spring rates to fit enthusiast- to motorsport-level coil-overs; complementary bump spring system fine-tunes vehicles with high grip and high downforce, with rates from 50 to 7,000 pound-inches.

Eibach
Mark Krumme
Head of Marketing, North America

■ **HOT PRODUCT:**
OTG Waterless Wash
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Designed for track-day clean-up of paint and glass to keep vehicles clean between runs and looking their best for podium photos.

Malco Products
Seth Glauberman
CEO & President

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** D1200+ Battery Charger & Maintainer
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Capable of charging both lead-acid (flooded or AGM) and lithium 12-volt batteries; microprocessor-controlled to deliver the current the battery needs, when it needs it.

OPTIMA Batteries
Jim McIlvaine
eCare Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Mazda Shocks
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Partnerships with Spec Miata, Spec MX5 and MX5 Cup; applications range from nonadjustable shocks for the Spec Miata up to three-way-adjustable models for MX5Cup; quality damping gives drivers more support and slows tire degradation.

Penske Racing Shocks
Aaron Lambert Sr.
COO

■ **HOT PRODUCT:** Racing & High-Performance Street Oils
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Full synthetic lines start with PAO/ester, also known as Group V, base stocks with extremely high sheer strengths to support modern motor outputs; ZDDP packages protect against top-end wear; gear oil and transmission fluids also available.

Red Line Oil
Mark Beatty
Brand Director

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Burnished Spec 37 Race-Ready Rotors
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Include a proprietary process that removes impurities and oils introduced during the machining and manufacturing process; provide a race-ready, heat-cycled surface, eliminating all pre-bedding, saving time and increasing life expectancy.

Wilwood Engineering
Dave Brzozowski
Motorsports Manager

Higher power levels, faster lap times and greater demand for reliability under extreme conditions is driving the market, says Rich Barsamian, vice president of sales and marketing at Advanced Clutch Technology (ACT).

"This has pushed drivetrain components—especially clutches—to deliver not only increased torque capacity but also enhanced thermal resistance and longer lifespan across a variety of applications," he says.

Seth Glauberman, CEO and president of Malco Products, credits groups such as SCCA, GRIDLIFE, NASA and others with making the sport more accessible at more levels.

"With regional events and open track days, the average racer can do more as a hobby," he says. "Cars are safer, and equipment has made it a safer hobby or semi-professional endeavor."

But more oversight often also means more rules, says Aaron Lambert Sr., COO of Penske Racing Shocks.

"It depends on the series being raced in and what the rules are. We have seen an influx of 'electronically' adjustable shocks that are being run on track-day cars. When it comes to competition, most of those electronics are ruled out, so, on that side, I think it's evolved due to data acquisition," he notes. "Both on- and off-car data collecting has become the norm, which allows the end user to fine-tune their shocks for their feel or handling issue. Prior to this, it was really based off driver feel."

COMMON CONNNECTIONS

Asked about misinformation when dealing with racers, Glauberman notes the most common misconception is that "they're



Becoming the local road racing expert means doing your homework on the tracks and classes that host your customers. (Photo courtesy Wilwood)

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Learning and sharing all you can will strengthen your relationship with road racers. (Photo courtesy Penske Racing Shocks)

only concerned with making more horsepower."

Barsamian recommends not underestimating how abusive and demanding road racing is on clutch systems.

"Many assume that a high-performance street clutch is 'good enough' for track use, especially during HPDEs or Time Attack sessions," he reports. "But, the reality is that even weekend warriors often push their drivetrains to levels that require true motorsport-grade components."

Lambert cautions against assuming racers always know exactly which components are already on their vehicles.

"A lot of times racers are getting second- or third-hand cars and just going out and racing based off previous owners saying, 'It's race-ready.' I tell most shops, racers and customers that if you don't know what's on your car, you must find out. It will save a lot of time and money in the end. Most of all, from a safety standpoint, you need to know what you're sitting in."

That type of information comes when professionals have an opening conversation with each new customer, Brzozowski adds.

"(Some shops) don't ask enough questions about exactly what the customer is doing with the vehicle, the class they compete in, the rules and regulations in effect, and what they are trying to accomplish," he says. "Have experienced people (manufacturers) you can go to to ask questions, ensuring the customer gets the correct answer the first time."

With so much to learn, shops should be continually focused on educating their staff on the latest products and innovations.

"Have an understanding of how suspension changes affect the balance of the vehicle," says Krumme. "Most people will buy a coil-over system and not know what really happens when they turn the knob on a one- to three-way adjustable shock. Shops should reach out to their manufacturers to take advantage of their experience and understanding of these systems."

Back to his earlier comments about saving weight, McIlvaine has seen too many shops looking to install the absolute lightest battery into a race vehicle that will start the engine, often leading to the use of motorcycle or other powersports batteries in automotive applications.

"That can potentially be a big mistake, as sometimes charging systems fail on vehicles and the battery needs to at least supply enough power to safely get a vehicle back to the pits," he explains. "Batteries with enough reserve capacity can potentially allow a vehicle to finish a race, but smaller motorcycle batteries typically have nowhere near the capacity needed to operate many race cars for that amount of time."

Finally, Beatty notes that, in road racing, rarely is there a universal solution.

"The cars, the drivers and the teams can be very sophisticated, so understanding their needs has never been more important," he says. "The industry was built on relationships and shops need to focus on building them with their customers. One size does not fit all, so get to know your customers and point them to the products that fit their needs and not to what is on sale or cheap."

SPEAKING THE RACERS' LANGUAGE

Looking to increase relationships and sales with road racers? ACT's Barsamian has a simple equation: "speak the language of the racer—and back it up with data."

He says that "road racers care about lap times, consistency and reliability. Shops that want to grow in this space should focus on offering solutions that address heat management, serviceability and torque-holding under extreme conditions—not just horsepower ratings. We recommend shops lead with technical credibility—talk about torque curves, thermal thresholds and friction materials. Highlight real-world use cases and build relationships with local track day groups or HPDE organizations. Being trackside, even as a vendor or adviser, builds visibility and positions your shop as a





Road racing product technology advances year after year. (Photos courtesy Red Line Oil)

trusted resource, not just a reseller."

Becoming the local road racing expert means doing your homework on the tracks and classes that host your customers.

"There are so many variations," says Wilwood's Brzozowski. "Concentrate on marketing to the grassroots racer."

You'll then want to have in-demand products on hand and available for immediate purchase, says Eibach's Krumme.

"It's safe to say that most racers are procrastinators. With that in mind, have at least two pieces of inventory available of your most popular springs and/or suspension components," he suggests. "That goes a long way—if racers have a last-minute need and a shop is able to fill it, they'll keep coming back. The nature of road racing is that it requires short windows of time to work on the vehicle."

One way to build repeat business is through a consistent maintenance regimen, OPTIMA's McIlvaine suggests.

"One of the biggest mistakes made with any vehicle that isn't driven regularly is to leave the battery unmaintained. Any vehicle that only sees occasional or weekend use should be connected to a quality battery maintenance device, to ensure the battery is ready to go when needed."

Highlighting offerings that appeal to road racers and general performance customers can help build a shop's brand, says Glauberman from Malco Products.

"There are a lot of services an average racer can benefit from. You don't need to be a race-only shop to provide upgrades like suspension, high-performance brakes, ECM tuning and safety items such as harnesses, roll cages and more."

Highlighting specific product requirements can give racing customers the edge they're seeking, says Red Line's Beatty.

"The best tool for our resellers is education. There is so much information (and misinformation) in the market and on the internet about fluids. We are in a space where customers are able to purchase multiple times per season, and while many have already formed an opinion and product preference, each purchase is an opportunity to teach—and in doing so create a new, recurring purchase," he says. "Our best dealers have invested time in an understanding of our products and educate their customers when the opportunity presents itself, which creates long-term sales."

The more your shop can learn and then share with customers, the better your relationship with the local racing community will be.

"Come take a shock class. Learn how to read and use a shock dyno," says Lambert from Penske Racing Shocks. "Take an online course to learn how to read data. Learn vehicle setups—there are a lot of good shops out there that offer in-person classes or seminars on how to set up a car, corner-balance a car, how to set up shocks, how to measure and set ride height, etc. Learn all you can." ***TS***

SST
SILVER SPORT
Transmissions



T-5



TKX



MAGNUM-XL-F



TR-4050

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The Grand National Roadster Show annually showcases the world's best hot rods and customs.

Doing the MATH on Today's Show Cars

Award-winning hot rods are more amazing than ever, but they come at a price.

BY TONY THACKER PHOTOS COURTESY TONY THACKER



Born in England, Tony Thacker is an accredited automotive journalist, author and book publisher, and served as marketing director at the famed SO-CAL Speed Shop.

The 75th annual O'Reilly Auto Parts Grand National Roadster Show (GNRS) presented by Meguiar's went down in history in February as one of the all-time memorable custom car shows.

People came from all over the world to view the crème de la crème, with no less than 11 roadsters competing for the title of America's Most Beautiful Roadster (AMBR) and another 11 nonroadsters competing for the Al Slonaker Memorial Award—both honors presented by ARP Racing Products.

The 2025 AMBR award went to Beth and Ross Meyers' 1936 Roadster scratch-built by Troy Trepanier's Rad Rides by Troy of Manteno, Illinois. Powered by a McCulloch-supercharged, 1957 312-ci Ford Y-block, the car was stunningly detailed, from its handcrafted steel body to its race-inspired, mid-century-styled wheels.

The buzz around Building 4 at the Fairplex in Pomona, California, was that the '36 cost upwards of $3 million and, while that is a lot of money, I wonder if it matters? Or is it just another sign of these inflationary times?

Over in Building 6, the Slonaker Award went to Bill Barbato's 1933 Pontiac Sedan



The title of 2025 America's Most Beautiful Roadster was awarded to Beth and Ross Meyers' 1936 Roadster scratch-built by Troy Trepanier's Rad Rides by Troy.

built by Andy Leach's CAL Auto Creations of Bennington, Nebraska. Likewise, it was rumored that one, two or maybe more Slonaker entries all cost well north of $1 million to build.

With 22 vehicles in competition, you can quickly calculate that there was probably more than $20 million worth of builds right there on the floor, and that's not counting the 600 or so other cars on display indoors, or the 1,000 to 1,500 that drove in for the outdoor display.



This year's GNRS Slonaker Award went to Bill Barbato's 1933 Pontiac Sedan built by Andy Leach's CAL Auto Creations.

RISING COSTS

It doesn't do to dwell on the cost of these cars, but, if nothing else, it's an indicator of the health of the hobby.

Yes, for the most part, it's a graying crowd. (Heck, Forest Lawn Memorial-Parks had a booth at the show, but the salesperson looked dumbfounded when I told her that we typically disposed of our ashes via drag race parachute and therefore didn't require a plot!)

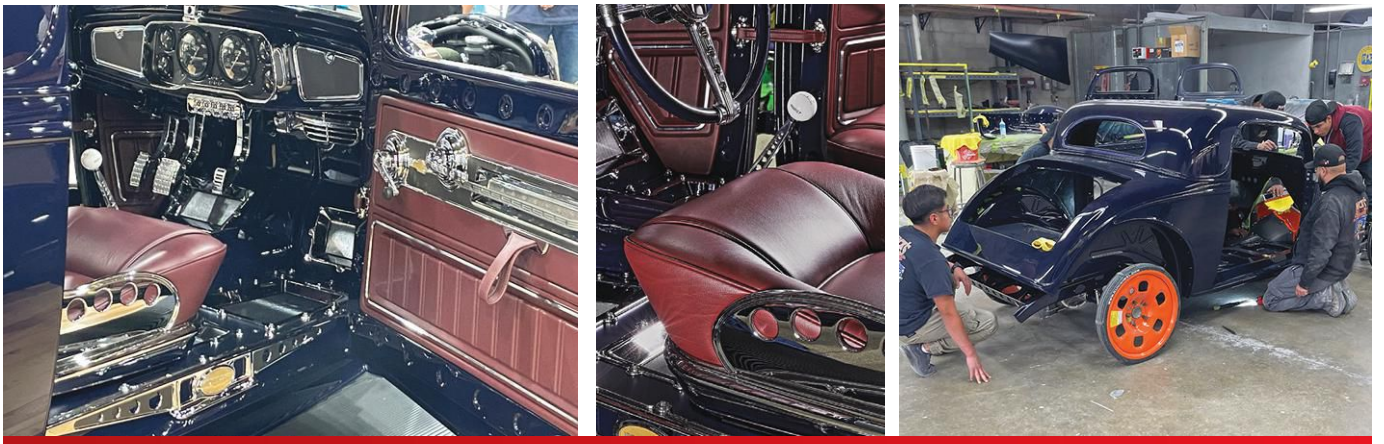
That said, it's obvious today's core of hot rodders is aging out and that not enough young people are entering the hobby to sustain its current levels. Nevertheless, the market has legs—for now, at least.

Still, why do these cars cost so much to build? I spoke to Mick Jenkins of Mick's Paint in Pomona, California. Mick's has been heavily involved in three AMBR winners and this year had 10 vehicles scattered throughout the show.

"It's time and materials," says Jenkins. "The cost of doing business has risen dramatically. For example, our trash collection bill doubled last year and we have no recourse, nobody to talk to about that."

All other utilities have likewise gone up, as have salaries, especially here in California where there is a robust auto industry with a lot of jobs but, like everywhere else, a





Ironworks Speed & Kustom built a Fairway '35 Chevy Coupe with plenty of special billet touches.

shortage of skilled labor. Therefore, the cost of talented employees has increased.

An internet search recently revealed there were 256 auto-related startups in Los Angeles. Obviously, not all are building vehicles but, nevertheless, a lot are, and they require a skilled workforce, which pushes up wages.

At the beginning of the year, ZipRecruiter was seeing hourly salaries for skilled painters as high as $50.51, and I know from experience that that rate is not uncommon. Modern paint technology requires more from gunslingers than ever before, and a good painter demands a good salary.

Most California shops are now charging $100 an hour, and some are up to $200 an hour or more. Couple the increasing cost of employees with the increasing cost of employing somebody and the increasing cost of materials, and you can see where the dollars go.

Meanwhile, a gallon of good PPG red paint now costs $1,300-plus. A typical small car like a Porsche 911 takes 3 to 4 gallons of color, plus another 3 to 4 gallons of clear that, with reducer and hardener, costs another $800-$900 per gallon. There's also the increasing cost of regulation compliance.



Quality builds start with an estimate of a minimum 1,000 hours of labor. Top-end show cars can then reach up to 10 times that amount.

Shop owners recognize this and know they have to set prices accordingly.

ANTE UP

I recently got a call from a friend who wanted to compete at the GNRS. He didn't expect to win, but he wanted to show well. He said he had some money and had put aside $20,000 for paint.

I kinda laughed and said, "$20K will just about buy the materials, but a good-but-basic paint job now will cost you about $80,000-$100,000. However, a show-winning job can cost two or three times that or more, especially if it's a multicolored candy or flake job."

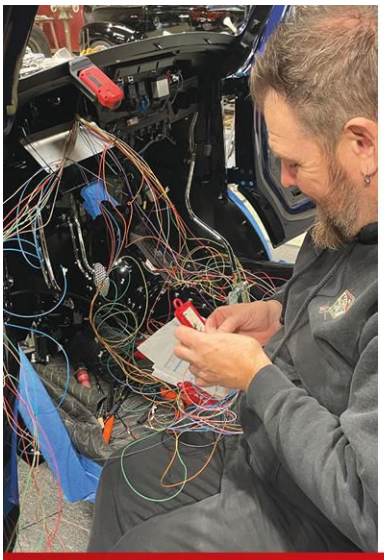
My friend was shocked, saying, "I had no idea." Most people don't.

Nobody really wants to calculate what a project costs to build but, since customers usually want to know, a good place to start for a quality build is a minimum 1,000 hours of labor. Top-quality show cars can then reach up to 10 times that amount.

Think of three or four workers going at it for weeks at a time and you can see how the hours and dollars quickly stack up. It takes a special customer that can afford consistent billing in the range of $20,000 per week, week after week, to sustain those types of builds.

Of course, body and paint are only one expense. Other areas come with their own price tags as well.

For example, Jack Nickerson of JAX Motorsports, who offers top-of-the-line wiring services for race and show cars and was featured in the August 2025 issue of THE SHOP magazine, says, "a typical Mil-Spec (military





Each portion of a top build can be taken to new heights. Jack Nickerson of JAX Motorsports offers Mil-Spec wiring services to discerning customers.

specification) wiring job such as the one I did for Larry Jacinto's '41 Willys pickup built by the Veazie Brothers Fabrication in Pomona (California) easily cost $30K-$40K."

It takes time to wire a vehicle from scratch with no existing harness, he explains, "especially when you are trying to marry existing engine-control systems to instrument clusters, audio, etc. The components themselves are expensive as well."

Upholstery is another area getting increasingly expensive, with show contenders requiring ever more complicated and sophisticated jobs using materials that are also rising in price. A good interior can easily cost $100,000.

Meanwhile, don't get me started on chrome plating. In May 2023, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) voted to ban the substance known as chromium 6, effectively banning decorative chrome plating and chromic acid anodizing in the state by 2027. That ban not only puts people out of business but also burdens car builders and those in other industries with the added costs of shipping plating out of state.

A hefty bumper for a '50s car now costs about $5,000 to plate. Add to that the cost of building a crate and shipping that bumper out of state to a plater and you can envision the dollar signs racking up. Completely plating a show car now costs another $100,000 or more.

SPECIAL TOUCHES PUSH PRICES HIGHER

Another trend that's adding to the cost of car building is the process of replicating components in CNC'd billet aluminum. Why? Because it looks different, can be finished in different ways, can be more defined and, in some cases, shows a heightened level of creativity.

Rodger Lee of Ironworks Speed & Kustom in Bakersfield, California, saw more and more of his builds going down the billet road and, consequently, now designs and prints one-off components in-house while outsourcing the machining. Lee's Slonaker entry, a Fairway '35 Chevy Coupe, is resplendent with billet components—even the stunning bucket seats were machined from billet.

Stunning, yes, but at what cost?

You can see now, by just this brief toe dip into the world of show cars, that it's an expensive hobby. But does it really matter? Not a jot, if you have the right customer. It's like racing—if you want to make $1 million, start with $2 million.

These high-end hot rods give thousands of people pleasure, keep thousands more employed and provide a canvas for a creative art form. There's still a place for them.

Finally, to put today's costs into perspective, let's look back. In 2003, SO-CAL Speed Shop built a chopped 1951 Merc for the late Gene Olsen. (In fact, Mick Jenkins painted it.) Some in the media questioned the rumored $600K cost—how could that be, they asked?

But, $600,000 in 2003 dollars is about $1.1 million today. By comparison, the median price of a house in Los Angeles in 2003 was $326,000, while today that same house would be listed at $1.2 million.

So, the cost of a show-winning build has increased in step with inflation. I say don't worry about it and just enjoy. ***TS***

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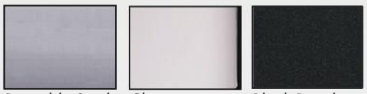


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Celebrating the 75th Grand National Roadster Show

Award winners exemplify the creativity & precision of the industry's top builders.

PHOTOS COURTESY GRAND NATIONAL ROADSTER SHOW/BRANDAN GILLOGLY

The O'Reilly Auto Parts Grand National Roadster Show, presented by Meguiar's, recognized the country's top roadsters, hot rods and custom vehicles for the 75th time back in February. Two of the custom car world's most coveted awards—America's Most Beautiful Roadster (AMBR) and the Al Slonaker Memorial Award—celebrate the creativity and precision of the industry's top builders.

Officials report a record-setting crowd visited the Fairplex in Pomona, California, for the weekend's festivities. More than 50 past AMBR and Al Slonaker Memorial Award winners came together in the Feature Building, presented by the Petersen Automotive Museum.

The event also recognized Bill Ganahl and South City Rod and Custom as the 2025 GNRS Builder of the Year with a special display and featured a collection of 16 George Barris custom creations including the King of Kustomizers' "Hirohata Merc"; 1958/59, '60 and '62 AMBR winners; and the "Batmobile," "Munster Coach" and "Dragula."

Bill Barbato's golden 1933 Pontiac Sedan built by CAL Auto Creations was awarded the 2025 Al Slonaker Memorial Award.

"The 75th annual Grand National Roadster Show demonstrated that the world of hot rodding and custom cars is as innovative and popular as ever," said John Buck, owner of Rod Shows and producer of the Grand National Roadster Show. "We were honored to have so many industry legends, historic cars and groundbreaking builds fill the Fairplex this year, and it was the perfect way to

celebrate more than seven decades of this incredible show."

AMBR WINNER

1936 Ford Roadster

America's Most Beautiful Roadster, considered the ultimate recognition in hot rodding, was awarded to a 1936 Ford Roadster owned by Ross Myers and built by Rad Rides by Troy. Myers' newest build bested 10 other roadsters, taking home the title's $12,500 prize sponsored by ARP Fasteners.



The AMBR-winning fender-less '36 roadster fetaures a scratch-built body with innovative modifications to the car's shape and proportions.







Ten finalists vied for the designation of America's Most Beautiful Roadster.



America's Most Beautiful Roadster, considered the ultimate recognition in hot rodding, was awarded to a 1936 Ford Roadster owned by Ross Myers and built by Rad Rides by Troy.



The Al Slonaker Memorial Award is dedicated to the memory of Al and Mary Slonaker, who founded the Grand National Roadster Show in 1950.



The award has been presented to the show's best nonroadster vehicle since 1974.

Myers—whose name was added to the award's 9.5-foot-tall perpetual trophy alongside a "who's who" of hot rodding, including legendary builders like Barris, Andy Brizio and Boyd Coddington—entered the fender-less '36 roadster featuring a scratch-built body with innovative modifications to the car's shape and proportions. Designed around a blown Ford Y-block engine, the car is mounted on a custom frame, complete with torsion bar suspension, wishbone-style radius rods and Ridetech adjustable shocks.

The 1957 McCulloch-supercharged 312-ci Y-block is backed by a Bowler 4-speed transmission and a Winters quick-change rear end. Finished in modified Porsche aventurine green metallic BASF/Glasurit paint and with a fully custom and hand-tipped leather interior, the winner's bespoke touches include suicide doors and a hand-built lift-off top.

AL SLONAKER MEMORIAL AWARD

1933 Pontiac Sedan



Bill Barbato's golden 1933 Pontiac Sedan built by CAL Auto Creations was awarded the 2025 Al Slonaker Memorial Award. Barbato rose to the top of a diverse field of 11 contenders, which included a two-engine 1935 International Truck, a 1973 DeTomaso Pantera and a 1971 VW Thing.

Dedicated to the memory of Al and Mary Slonaker, who founded the Grand National Roadster Show in 1950, the award has been presented to the show's best nonroadster vehicle since 1974. Barbato also received a $12,500 prize courtesy of ARP Fasteners and a billet trophy.



The O'Reilly Auto Parts Grand National Roadster Show, presented by Meguiar's, recognized the country's top roadsters, hot rods and custom vehicles for the 75th time back in February.



The event features a variety of high-profile vehicles, historic cars and groundbreaking builds.

The Pontiac sedan's design was driven by Barbato's fascination with Art Deco styling. Designed by Gary Ragle and Eric Black, the build sits on a custom-fabricated frame by Liquid Metalworks. Finished in AuraBella Gold paint, every piece of the sedan is hand-formed including a chopped and sectioned body, custom grille, hood side vents, handmade running boards and one-off front and rear valances.

The luxurious interior boasts contoured leather panels with diamond-pattern stitching, a one-off dash with Pontiac-inspired trim, machined crown molding with hidden LED lights and an Art Deco-inspired steering wheel.

CELEBRATING HOT RODS

This year's GNRS also featured historic cars like "Dyno" Don Nicholson's 1976 NHRA Pro Stock Ford Mustang II and Bill Niekamp's modified 1927 Ford roadster that set records on the Bonneville Salt Flats. Detroit's Dan Webb debuted an interpretation of the late 1920s French race car called the "Panhard Razor" that features a steering wheel that goes around the driver.

Meanwhile, the 19th annual Grand Daddy Drive-In hosted more than 1,500 vehicles ranging from classic hot rods to modern customs in the outdoor portion of the show, while the popular pinstriper auctions on Saturday and Sunday raised more than $75,000 for the Gavin R. Stevens Foundation.

Next year's 76th Grand National Roadster Show returns Jan. 30-Feb. 1, 2026, to the Pomona Fairplex.

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Ford Ranger Cat-Back Exhaust

BORLA Performance Industries, Johnson City, Tennessee, presents its Cat-Back Exhaust System for 2024 Ford Ranger XL, XLT and Lariat models that improves horsepower and torque. System 140975BC features two full tailpipes and delivers the classic S-Type sound with no drone or resonance inside the vehicle. Made from T-304 stainless steel with black chrome on T-304 stainless steel tips, the system features all-welded construction for durability and long life.

EV Transmission Upgrade



Torque Trends, Wittmann, Arizona, presents its TorqueBox EV Transmission Upgrade. With an 8-inch diameter, the planetary-based TorqueBox is available in 1.58-, 1.90- and 3.00-to-1 ratios to fit into tight places and most automotive transmission tunnels. Weighing less than the transmission it replaces, the unit adds range and installs easily. The input shaft allows up to 15 degrees of flex in both directions of rotation without damage, reducing the chance of fracture due to high spike torque loads. The HD TorqueBox handles up to 1,250 pound-feet of torque.



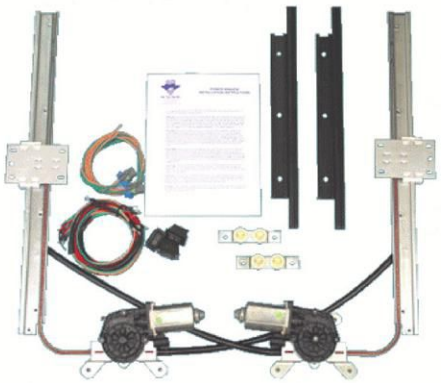
Mustang Clutch Kits

Centerforce, Prescott, Arizona, presents a Solid Street Twin (SST) Clutch Kit for 1963-95 Ford Mustang applications. The new SST kit, engineered for vehicles producing up to 925 pound-feet of torque, is designed as an economical option for street car enthusiasts looking for a complete twin-disc clutch setup. Maintaining daily-driver usability while maximizing performance, the kit's 10.4-inch twin-disc design utilizes solid hubs to reduce rotational weight on the output shaft for quick, clean shifts. High-quality organic friction materials ensure smooth engagement.

Mustang Adjustable Front Sway Bar



Ridetech, Jasper, Indiana, presents an Adjustable Front Sway Bar for 1979-93 Ford Mustang models. Designed to work with the company's other Fox body suspension components to allow enthusiasts to fine-tune the balance of their front suspension setups, the sway bar features an adjustable bent blade-style design that offers three selectable bar rates, making it suitable for multiple disciplines like street performance, autocross or road course track days. The bar comes with low-friction bushings, billet aluminum mounts and adjustable end links.



Power Window Kits

BALL's Rod & Kustom, Brooks, Kentucky, offers Flat Glass Power Windows Kits for automobiles from the 1920s to 1980s. The LECTRA-Glide power windows (6- and 12-volt) feature a center lift and "Z" support to prevent the window from rocking. **Siemens** motors deliver 75 pounds of lift and 21 inches of travel that can be reduced if needed. The made-in-the-USA kits include a stainless steel drive and screw motor assembly for quiet, dependable operation, powder-coated window channels and a heavy-gauge steel slide.



50-State Street-Legal C8 Corvette Supercharger

ProCharger, Kansas City, Kansas, presents its Supercharger Systems for Chevrolet C8 Corvette Stingray models, now certified street-legal in all 50 states. The systems deliver 230-plus hp gains while maintaining OEM drivability, reliability and efficiency, and bolt on with no permanent modifications or engine/transmission removal. Engineered to blend seamlessly with the C8's factory design, the systems include low and standard intake manifold options.



Exhaust Hanger Kit

Rad Rides by Troy, Manteno, Illinois, presents a high-strength Exhaust Hanger Kit made to adapt to specific setups and minimize vibration and movement. Kits include a machined-aluminum exhaust hanger cover (hardcoat black-anodized), laser-cut 3/8 stainless steel weld-on exhaust bracket and rubber damper.

Heavy-Duty C10 Frame



Heidts, Lake Zurich, Illinois, presents its HF-640 Heavy-Duty Frame for 1967-72 Chevy C10 trucks. The all-new, full-boxed frame is engineered for serious builders and restorers looking to replace aging factory frames with a modern, high-performance foundation. Crafted in the USA from 7-gauge HRPO American steel, the frame bolts directly to factory cab and bed mounting points and includes the company's Superide II independent front suspension and Parallel 4-Link rear suspension, substantially improving ride quality, handling and chassis rigidity.



Expanded Wheel Stud Selection

ARP, Ventura, California, offers High-Performance Wheel Studs for competition and street applications. The studs are manufactured from 8740 chromoly steel and precision heat-treated in-house to a tensile strength of 190,000 psi. The threads are rolled after the heat treatment to provide improved fatigue strength. All studs are cadmium plated for extra protection—with the unique bullet-nosed Speed Studs given a baked-on dry film lubricant. Replacement press-in and screw-in wheel studs are available for a variety of applications.



Mustang Suspension Caster Camber Plates

BMR Suspension, Lakeland, Florida, offers Suspension Caster Camber Plates for 1994-2004 Ford Mustang models. The plates add caster/camber adjustability and fix alignment issues on lowered Mustangs. The made-in-the-USA systems utilize 0.25-inch laser-cut steel plate and Teflon-lined spherical bearings to provide a camber range from minus-3.5 degrees to plus-1 degree. With a 100% bolt-on design, they are suitable for street performance, drag racing and handling applications and available in red or black hammertone powder-coat finishes.

Cayenne Exhaust



Akrapovič, Horsham, Pennsylvania, presents its Evolution Line Titanium exhaust system for the next-generation Porsche Cayenne (536.2). The system is finished with hand-laid carbon fiber tailpipes that employ acoustic reflectors to enhance the sound delivered to the vehicle's cabin. The V-8 Cayenne system saves 26.2 pounds (45%) compared to stock and improves power by 5.4 hp at 2,100 rpm and torque by 13.7 pound-feet at 2,050 rpm. The Akrapovič Sound Kit allows drivers to remotely control the valves and resulting sound.



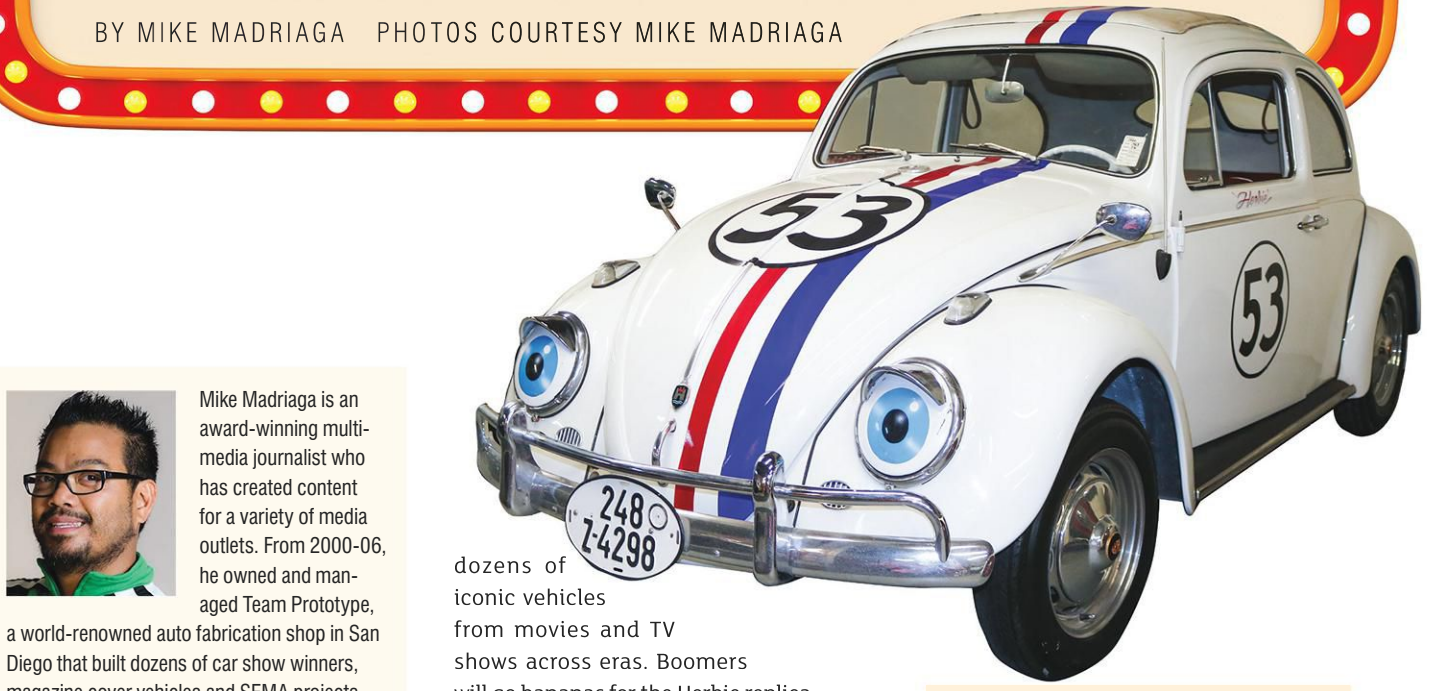
Tri-Five Chevy Control Arms

Classic Performance Products, Placentia, California, presents its Totally Tubular Control Arm set for Tri-Five Chevy applications, designed to add 5 degrees of caster while providing full wheel travel and minimal friction. The arms are made from 1-1/4-inch tubing and the pivot barrels are thick 1-1/2-inch tubing to eliminate distortion from welding and hard use. The bushings are made from self-lubricating, nonsqueak patented plastic and the billet 4140 alloy steel cross-shafts and sleeves are zinc-plated for lasting performance. ***TS***

A TOUR THROUGH HOLLYWOOD CARS MUSEUM & LIBERACE GARAGE

Classic vehicles from the small & big screens offer a nostalgic trip through movie car history.

BY MIKE MADRIAGA PHOTOS COURTESY MIKE MADRIAGA



The Hollywood Cars Museum and Liberace Garage is a sprawling, 30,000-square-foot facility dedicated to well-known cars from the large and small screens.

Mike Madriaga is an award-winning multimedia journalist who has created content for a variety of media outlets. From 2000-06, he owned and managed Team Prototype, a world-renowned auto fabrication shop in San Diego that built dozens of car show winners, magazine cover vehicles and SEMA projects.

As the 2024 SEMA Show brightened up the Las Vegas Convention Center with 3-foot stacks protruding from high-powered engine bays, ginormous chrome wheels and glittery, iridescent paint jobs, a few auto enthusiasts took a nostalgic detour into a place that offered examples of even more eccentric builds. This hidden gem could only be described as a Hollywood time machine.

About 4 miles south of the convention center sits the Hollywood Cars Museum and Liberace Garage.

At this sprawling, 30,000-square-foot museum, the name says it all. It features dozens of iconic vehicles from movies and TV shows across eras. Boomers will go bananas for the Herbie replica, aka "The Love Bug," and its stretch limo variation parked nearby, complete with the same racing stripe and a custom velvet tuck-and-roll interior. Gen Xers might marvel at the original "RoboCop" car or the "General Lee." And millennials can geek out over Paul Walker's bright green Mitsubishi Eclipse from "The Fast and the Furious," complete with faux bullet holes from the scene where Vin Diesel's character yells "NOS!" just before the car goes "boom." The red-colored RX-7 that won the first race in the movie is parked next to the Eclipse.

"These were actual stunt cars from the first 'The Fast and the Furious' film," recalls the museum's curator and property manager, Steve Levesque. "I was with Michael Dezer, the owner (of the museum and property it sits on), in Burbank, California, when these were just sitting out in an alley. And now, we've been offered a lot of money for these cars. A lot. And the owner goes, 'Nah, we'll hang on to them.'"

AN ACTUAL CAR COMMUNITY

In 2006, Dezer purchased the Tropicana Industrial Center 10-acre lot with garages and shops for an undisclosed price. The museum, which sits in the middle of the industrial center just off Dean Martin



Many vehicles in the museum come with fascinating backstories.

Drive, isn't just a static showpiece of pop culture history—it's nestled among about 60 garages and shops where dedicated mechanics, builders and auto specialists help revive vehicles, including some of the iconic cars the museum hauls in.

"We utilize the tenants here when we have minor repair issues," Levesque says. "For example, Art of J's Tires handles tire replacements for museum cars—a regular occurrence."

The complex also has a collision center and a car wash to keep the museum vehicles shiny, and is home to an array of auto repair shops including some specializing in off-road, European and Japanese cars.

One shop on-site is where renowned Hollywood movie car builder Jay Ohrberg created some of the museum's standout pieces. Ohrberg's genius is evident in builds like the replica flying AMC Matador Coupe with jet engine effects from "The Man with the Golden Gun," a James Bond movie.

In the 1974 film, Roger Moore, who played Bond, faces off against Christopher Lee's Scaramanga, who drives and flies the AMC car-plane. "The original didn't survive filming," Levesque explains, "so Jay built this replica here. Those are real airplane wings."

Another Ohrberg creation on location is a tribute to Doc Hudson from Disney and Pixar's "Cars," styled like a cartoon-esque 1951 Hudson Hornet with windshield decals resembling eyes.

"The joke is, 'This wasn't used in the movie,' because, of course, the original movie was animated," Levesque quips.

The museum also houses two versions of K.I.T.T. from the television show "Knight Rider." A heavily modified "Super Pursuit Mode" version features wide fenders, spoilers, wings and hidden compartments that opened in the TV show to slow K.I.T.T. down. Nearby sits a standard black-on-black version. Ohrberg built both on location and contributed to the build of the original cars used in the 1980s hit starring David Hasselhoff.

Levesque introduces another jaw-dropping vehicle built by Ohrberg—a 38-foot-long, pink Mercedes-Benz convertible limousine with a heart-shaped jacuzzi in the back.

"This was featured on 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,'" Levesque says. The car, based on a Mercedes-Benz W116 chassis, was once used by Pebbles, a 1980s R&B singer, as she performed her hit, "Mercedes Boy." Robin Leach, host of the TV show, estimated the custom limo's worth at $1 million—a small fortune in 1987.

VEHICLES WITH HISTORY

While not built on-site, other vehicles in the museum come with fascinating backstories.

"The A-Team" van is an original stunt vehicle used in high-speed scenes featuring Mr. T. A "Back to the Future" DeLorean replica sports a flux capacitor and time-travel keypad. Meanwhile, an authentic "Starsky & Hutch" 1976 Ford Gran Torino showcases the original camera rigging used for intense chase scenes.

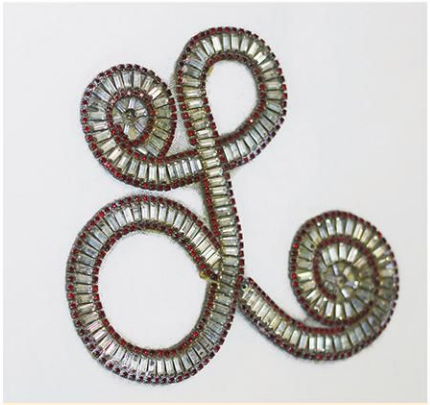
Then there's the epic, orange-colored vehicle with "01" on the sealed doors.

"Our 'General Lee' is an authentic production car that was one of the stunt cars in 'The Dukes of Hazzard' TV show that they would jump," Levesque says. "It has no motor, but they would tow and fling it. Sometimes into a barn. And then they would fix it and do it again. But that's why the 1968 and '69 Dodge Chargers are so expensive, because 'The Dukes of Hazzard' destroyed so many of them. They destroyed like hundreds. So, even a crappy one nowadays is like $50,000."

The museum has two "Batmobiles" and a "Bat Cycle" for comic book fans. One "Batmobile," licensed by George Barris, served as a promotional vehicle for the 1966 "Batman" TV series, while the other is one of 18 cars



A Swarovski crystal-covered Rolls Royce driven by Liberace in Palm Springs.



The museum transitions seamlessly into Liberace's crystal-studded vehicles, matched to his opulent outfits worn at his sold-out concerts, which are on display in glass cases.



Another Liberace standout is a white hot rod fused with a working grand piano, built in and by the museum as a tribute to his flamboyant style.

used in the film "Batman Returns" starring Michael Keaton.

Beyond the silver screen, the museum features additional automotive oddities, such as a 12-foot-tall roller skate hot rod painted like an American flag commissioned for fashion icon Marc Jacobs. A matching red, white and blue Rolls Royce from Liberace's collection sits in the next room.

STAR-STUDDED RIDES

The museum transitions seamlessly into Liberace's crystal-studded vehicles, matched to his opulent outfits worn at his sold-out concerts, which are on display in glass cases.

Levesque gestures to a Swarovski crystal-covered Rolls Royce. "This car alone, without the crystals, is worth over a million dollars. It's the same one Liberace drove in Palm Springs."

Another standout is a white hot rod fused with a working grand piano, built in and by the museum as a tribute to Liberace's flamboyant style.

The Liberace portion of the museum also doubles as a venue for classy events.

While the Hollywood Cars Museum and Liberace Garage in Las Vegas offers an intimate collection, Dezer's primary trove resides in Dezerland Park in Orlando, Florida, a sprawling 800,000-square-foot complex with about 2,000 historic cars, a Batcave, a skating rink and bowling alley, a movie theater and more, Levesque reveals.

"He's also got the world's largest collection of James Bond vehicles and memorabilia," Levesque says of the facility's owner. "He's got the Golden Gun, he's got Oddjob's hat and he's got full-size airplanes in the museum there."

Dezer, a prominent real estate developer from Florida and New York, initially envisioned luxury condominium towers for the Las Vegas site when he first purchased it in the mid-2000s, explains Levesque. However, when the economy crashed in 2008, those plans changed. The industrial center, originally dating back to the mid-1970s, found new life as a hub for automotive-related businesses, accommodating local mechanics, technicians and other entrepreneurs.

Levesque and Dezer linked up about a decade ago, and just like the special DMC DeLorean in the museum represents, the duo's trajectory set up the Hollywood time machine in Las Vegas for us to see and enjoy for years to come.

The Hollywood Cars Museum and Liberace Garage (hollywoodcarsmuseum.com) offers a nostalgic trip through entertainment history, giving fans a chance to relive the magic of the screen in real life. Admission is just $20, and kids get in free with paid adults. Add in ample free parking outside and a trip there is a "Gone in 60 Seconds" steal. **TS**

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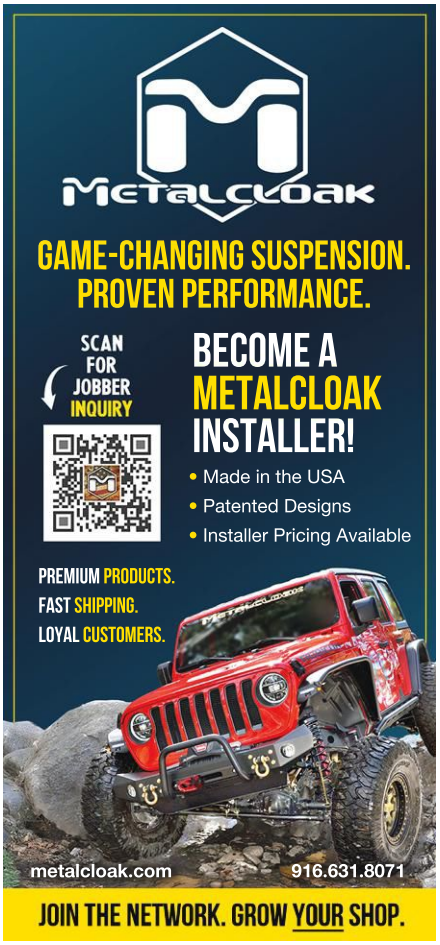

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PNW, Colorado the Best Places to Find Used Jeeps

Are you or your customers looking for a used Jeep for that next specialty build? A new study points to the Pacific Northwest and Colorado as the places where you'll have the most options.

Findings recently revealed by handcrafted wedding rings specialist Manly Bands show that Portland, Denver and Seattle have the highest rates of used Jeep vehicle availability in 2025 relative to population size.

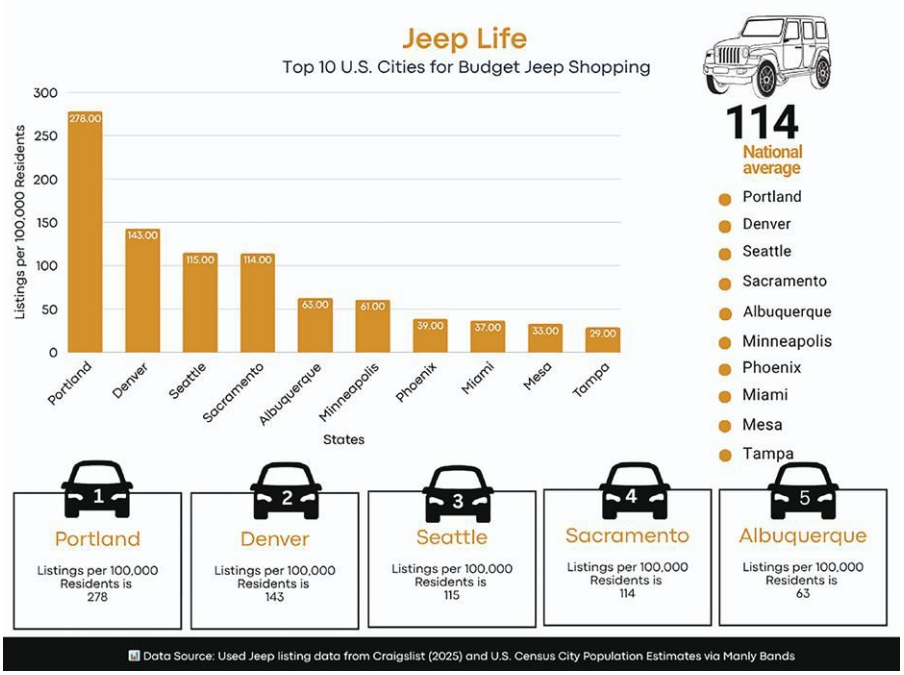
"The high listing volumes suggest many Americans in these markets have excellent opportunities to find affordable Jeep vehicles," Manly Brands noted in a press release announcing the findings. "This highlights the growing interest in outdoor adventure vehicles and people's desire to explore rugged terrain without breaking the bank."

The research analyzed pre-owned Jeep vehicle listings on Craigslist across 50 major U.S. cities. The listing volumes were compared to city populations to identify where Americans can access affordable Jeep vehicles for starting off-road adventures.

The top five were:

1. Portland, Oregon, tops the list with 278 listings per 100,000 residents, 930% higher than the national average of 27 listings. With a population of 615,267, the Rose City recorded 1,711 used Jeep vehicle listings on Craigslist.
2. Denver, Colorado, follows second with 143 listings per 100,000 residents. That's 430% higher than the national average. With a population of 715,891, the Mile High City logged 1,027 available used Jeep vehicles.
3. Seattle, Washington, ranks third with 115 listings per 100,000 residents, 326% higher than the national average. The Emerald City, home to 764,753 people, recorded 876 used Jeep vehicle listings.
4. Sacramento, California, ranks fourth, with 114 listings per 100,000 residents, about 322% higher than the national average. The California capital, with a population of 526,954, recorded 599 used Jeep vehicles available for purchase.

Findings from Manly Bands show that Portland, Denver and Seattle have the highest rates of used Jeep vehicle availability relative to population size. (Bottom photos by Jef White)



5. Albuquerque, New Mexico, rounds out the top five with 63 listings per 100,000 residents, roughly 133% higher than the national average. The Duke City, home to 557,198 people, generated 349 available used Jeep listings.

Minneapolis ranks sixth with 61 listings per 100,000 residents, followed by Phoenix in seventh with 39 listings per 100,000. Miami ranks eighth with 37 listings per 100,000, while Mesa, Arizona, ranks ninth with 33 listings per 100,000. Tampa, Florida, rounds out the top 10 with 29 listings per 100,000 residents.

Manly Bands (manlybands.com) creates wedding bands including five offerings inspired by iconic Jeep trails, including The Moab (emulated red rock) and The Rubicon (granite-inspired), designed by Jeep enthusiasts and overlanders.

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