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Jef White
Editor in Chief
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Midwest States the Cheapest to Buy & Own a Vehicle

Are rising vehicle purchase and ownership costs keeping your clients from upgrading or accessorizing? Shops located closer to the Left Coast likely had a more difficult time this year with strapped customers than those in the heartland.

Buying and operating a vehicle in 2025 was cheapest in the Midwest and Northeast, while drivers in the West were hardest hit with higher costs, according to National Business Capital's second annual report, "The Best States to Buy and Operate a Car." The study, released by the business lending platform in October, analyzed the full costs of buying and owning a typical vehicle—from sales tax and insurance to fuel, fees and road quality effects.

The study revealed a clear regional divide. Ohio took the No. 1 spot, followed by Indiana and Vermont. Meanwhile, Arizona (50th), Hawaii (47th) and California (45th) landed at or near the bottom, thanks to soaring gas prices and some of the nation's highest used car prices.

The data showed drivers out West paid plenty at the pump, as Pacific states averaged $4.24 a gallon for gas—nearly 50% more than the South—while pre-owned vehicles in the Mountain West were listed at more than $25,000 on average, compared to less than $15,000 in the Northeast. Only one state east of the Mississippi—Maryland—fell into the Bottom 10.

Meanwhile, the South was a mixed bag. Low fuel costs provided some relief, but many states layered on hidden expenses like personal property taxes and dealer documentation fees. Kentucky (seventh) was the South's lone Top 10 finisher, while most of its neighbors sat in the middle of the pack.

Other key findings:

- **The Midwest dominated**: With an average score of 59.4 out of 100, the Midwest was the most affordable vehicle region overall.
- **The Northeast had the cheapest cars**: Used car listings averaged just $14,904 in the Northeast, roughly 10% cheaper than the Midwest and more than $10,000 less per car than the Mountain West. Delaware, Vermont and Massachusetts all landed in the Top 10.
- **The West Coast's pain at the pump**: California topped the price-per-gallon fuel rankings at $4.61.
- **The roughest roads are out West**: The Midwest also scored best for smooth roads (88.1% acceptable rating), while Pacific states had the bumpiest, rated at just 73.9%.

Overall, the 10 cheapest states to own and operate a car in 2025 were Ohio, Indiana, Vermont, Delaware, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and North Dakota.

The bottom 10 were Arizona, Oklahoma, Nevada, Hawaii, Colorado, California, Washington, New Mexico, Maryland and Utah.

The study used the following metrics to determine rankings: dealer document fees (10%), median used car listing price (30%), average gas price (15%), sales tax (12%), fees and taxes (12%), insurance costs (15%) and road conditions (10%).

View the complete study at: https://www.nationalbusinesscapital.com/data-reports/the-best-states-to-buy-and-operate-a-car/. ***TS***

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AI's Place in Automotive Aftermarket Shops, Part 2

How artificial intelligence can power your company's engine behind the scenes.

BY BARRY ALT



With over 28 years of experience, Barry Alt leads the digital marketing team at Motorhead Digital, focused on transforming the online presence of businesses in the automotive aftermarket. The company's signature Visibility, Site and Marketing Maximizer programs are designed to enhance websites, social media and digital marketing strategies, attracting quality leads and maximizing revenue for auto restoration, restyling, performance and custom build shops. The MHD team can be reached at 585-766-9785, maximizesales@motorheaddigital.com or online at motorheaddigital.com.

Editor's note: *This is the second of a two-part article on integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into automotive aftermarket shops. Part I ran in the November 2025 issue of THE SHOP magazine.*

Artificial intelligence won't replace your best workers. But it can assist with locating quality employees.

The key to using AI to find the right person for your shop is asking AI the right questions and being specific about your needs, such as the skill level, special skills, tools required, location and type of employment, for example.

Using Deep Search in ChatGPT is the best way we've found to use AI to find new skilled team members searching to fill that needed spot in your shop. AI will search the web, including social media, Reddit, Craigslist and job-wanted sites.



PRO TIP: Be as specific as you can with your AI prompts. The more info you input, the easier it is for AI to narrow down the right candidates for the job and the better results you'll have.

RECOMMENDED AI SYSTEMS

There are tons of AI tools out there, but some are specifically designed to meet the needs of aftermarket auto shops like yours. Here are a few we recommend looking into that are AI-powered or work well with other AI tools:

- **CALENDLY**: Say goodbye to the back-and-forth of scheduling appointments once and for all. Calendly lets customers book a time that works for them, sends automatic reminders and keeps your calendar organized without you lifting a finger.
- **CLICKUP**: A cloud-based project management platform that helps teams plan, organize and track work through customizable tasks, views and collaboration tools.
- **FISHBOWL INVENTORY**: Never run out of the vital parts you need again. Fishbowl monitors your inventory and predicts what you'll need for upcoming jobs. The best part? It can even place orders for you automatically.
- **MAILCHIMP**: Email might have been fun once upon a time, but as important as it is, we've all got better things to do than draft another marketing message. Mailchimp's AI can help you create email updates, follow-ups and promotions that sound just like you.
- **MECH AI**: When a weird engine problem has your technicians stumped, MECH AI can save the day. It sifts through vehicle data to suggest likely fixes, so your team can diagnose and repair cars faster than ever.
- **SHOPMONKEY**: This super-handy tool helps you track every job happening in

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With the proper software, AI can track inventory in real time. (Image credit: Антон Сальников - stock.adobe.com)

your garage, with an easy way to look at each bay, so nothing gets overlooked.
- **Others:** AI is built into tools from Bosch and Snap-on.

PRO TIP: Pick the tools that solve the problems you deal with every day to make your job more enjoyable and keep your customers (and crew) happy.

WHAT AI CAN'T REPLACE

Right now, AI is great at handling routine tasks in the automotive industry—drafting emails, creating basic content, confirming appointments, performing predictive maintenance and even searching for parts. That frees up your team to focus on the big-ticket builds and custom projects you actually love.

But, if all the entry-level tasks go to AI, who's learning the fundamentals? Skipping the basics can leave your shop with gaps in experience that can greatly impact customer satisfaction levels. The shops that thrive in the automotive aftermarket are the ones that pair AI with real mentorship, building strong teams and future leaders.

At the end of the day, tools can help, but here's where people still run the show:
- **HANDS-ON PROBLEM-SOLVING**: Figuring out complex engine quirks or custom suspension setups still takes a sharp eye and plenty of experience.
- **MENTORSHIP & TRAINING**: Teaching new techs how to measure, fab and tweak requires guidance and real-world oversight.
- **CUSTOMER COMMUNICATIONS**: Explaining options, understanding a client's vision, responding to customer feedback and earning their trust are tasks that only humans can perform.
- **CREATIVE CUSTOMIZATION**: Deciding how a build flows, any fabrication work, the look of a custom paint job, or integrating unique parts takes intuition and judgment AI simply can't replicate.
- **CONTENT & COMMUNICATION**: AI can give you some great ideas and a clear place to start, but only you can capture your shop's personality and write in a voice that sounds like you.

PRO TIP: Schedule time for your team to work on projects without the help of AI; it'll keep their skills and minds sharp.

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

AI might feel like a quick fix to all your problems, but it isn't perfect. Here are some risks to keep in mind before implementing it in your shop:

Relying too much on AI

It's tempting to hand off a repetitive task and assume it's done. But even the best AI needs a human eye. Make sure a knowledgeable person on your team is always checking the work and making the final call.

Tools that don't work well together

It's important to understand that just like auto parts, not all software is compatible. So, before you invest in AI software or software that incorporates AI into its workflow, check that the new tool will work with your existing shop management system or any other software you have in place.

Skip this step, and you could end up with a clunky, frustrating workflow full of manual data entry, mistakes and wasted time—exactly what you're trying to avoid!

Skipping training

AI tools are only as smart as the people using them. If you skip training, you're



Start small, find the tools that fit your shop and use them to make daily operations easier. (Credit: SunSpirit - stock.adobe.com)

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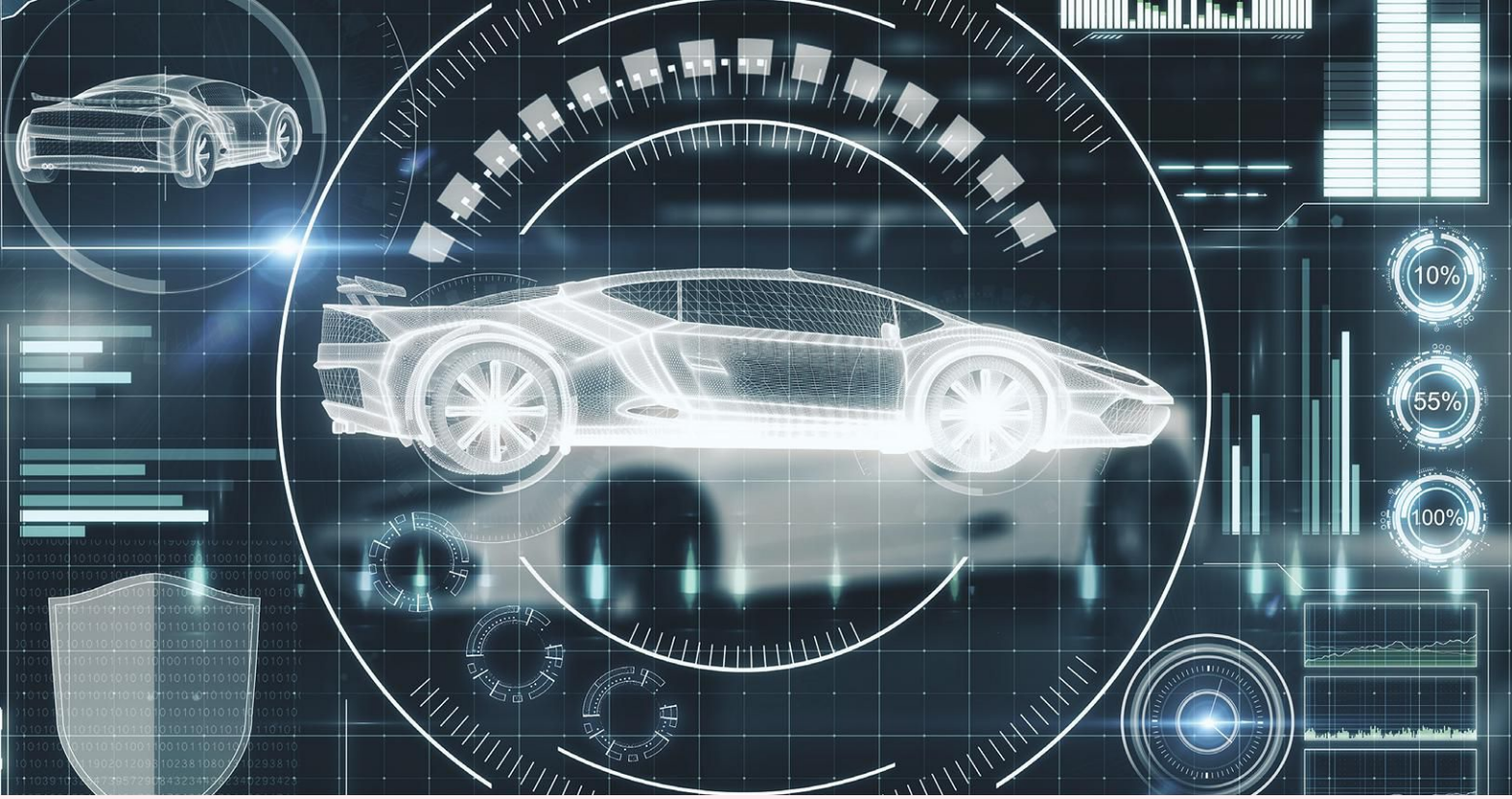
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WHSE25TS



AI can identify job patterns to help shops make more accurate, consistent quotes. (Image credit: Who is Danny - stock.adobe.com)

not getting your money's worth. A small investment of time to properly train your team ensures everyone knows how to use the tools correctly.

And when your team knows exactly what it's doing, you can rest assured you're safe from excessive mistakes and getting the most out of your investment.

Copyright risks

AI can generate content fast, but it can't tell what is or isn't protected by copyright. Using AI drafts for blogs, ads or social posts without review can accidentally copy someone else's work.

Always check content for originality and make sure it reflects your shop's voice; you're ultimately responsible for what you publish. We recommend that, even if you review and like the AI-generated content you find, it's best to continually edit it to make it your own.

Not understanding how to create AI prompts

No one will argue that AI is a powerful tool for aftermarket shops like yours, especially after everything we've just learned. Still, AI is only as effective as the prompts the user gives it, including any follow-up questions you ask.

It's also essential to tell AI how to act. For example, you can say, "Acting as an ASE Certified Master Technician, help me. ..." Starting the conversation off on the right foot and really thinking about the questions you ask help this technology dig deeper into the areas you care about.

Spend a little time learning the basics of prompt engineering and experiment with how you talk to AI so you can find the best ways to get the correct answers you're looking for.

FAQS

Can AI improve estimates?

Yes. By looking at past jobs, AI can highlight patterns and help you make more accurate, consistent quotes.

Is AI hard to set up?

Many tools are designed to be user-friendly, so you can start using them without having to be a tech wiz.

Will my new AI tech work with my current software?

It depends. Most AI tools are designed to integrate with popular shop management systems, so there's a good chance it'll work. That said, there are exceptions, so always double-check compatibility with your current system before making an investment.

Can AI handle ordering parts?

Absolutely! With the proper software, it can track inventory in real time, predict what you'll need for upcoming jobs and even give you a heads-up when stock is low.

Will AI replace office staff?

Definitely not. If you're trying to use AI to replace your office or parts procurement teams, chances are it won't end well. Humans are still needed for a lot of tasks. AI works best as a tool to help your team work smarter and faster, allowing them to focus their energy on important tasks and accomplish more in the same amount of time.

KEY TAKEAWAY

AI isn't here to take over your shop—it's here to help you work smarter, not harder. From speeding up diagnostics and inventory tracking to improving scheduling, marketing and parts searches, the right tools can save time and reduce repetitive work.

But the human touch still matters. Mentorship, hands-on problem-solving, customer relationships and creative decisions can't be replaced by software. The shops that thrive are the ones that balance AI with skilled, experienced teams.

Start small, find the tools that fit your shop and use them to make daily operations easier.

Oh, and a final note from the author: This article was not written with AI, but AI did help us with some research that we then validated as fact. ***TS***

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PERFORMANCE

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Spin To Win

Circle track racers want it all—speed, durability and value.

BY JOHN CAROLLO

Circle track racers come into every off-season with the same question—how do I make my car faster and more durable without breaking the bank?

This balancing act puts speed shops and engine builders to the test, asking them to rely on their innovation and strong supplier relationships to give clients the edge they seek heading into the new year. Economic and supply chain issues can pose further challenges, while rule changes or new series entries can readjust the playing field.

How can shops help circle track customers achieve their dreams of victory? Product manufacturers offer observations on market misconceptions to avoid, selling strategies to embrace and hot new products to consider as racers prepare for another year, looking to spin to win.

Most racers arrive at the shop with a good idea of what they need to improve performance. (Photo courtesy Eibach)

WHAT IT TAKES TO RACE

There are plenty of outside factors that can affect the health and viability of circle track racing and its passionate drivers. Among the biggest, of course, are budget constraints.

"The rising cost of racing is definitely having an effect," says Christian Goncalves, marketing manager for Canton Racing Products. "Racers are looking for components that last longer and perform better over time—not just the cheapest options. That's where durable, race-proven products really stand out."

Eddie Smith, manager of MPD Racing, sees costs and inflation as current market challenges. "The price of engines, tires and large components is having effect on racing," he says.

Rich Barsamian, vice president of sales and marketing for Advanced Clutch Technology, explains how racers now seemingly weigh every purchase more carefully.

"Instead of asking, 'What's the fastest?' many ask, 'What lasts the longest per dollar?' That changes the market from being purely performance-driven to performance-per-dollar-driven," he says. "Companies that can prove reliability and value win, while others struggle to justify premium pricing."

A specific economic area to watch, says Graham Fordyce, circle track sales manager for Holley Performance Brands, is the price of raw materials.

"These costs continue to have an effect on tire prices, making it difficult for racers to afford additional resources," he says. "Also, for dirt racing, more regulations on trucking are changing the landscape of how teams get their rigs to and from the track."

Wade Moon, technical sales manager at Peterson Fluid Systems, says the most noticeable economic effects are in the "general costs associated with racing, as well as track closings."

Meanwhile, there are trends inside the

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Advanced Clutch Technology
Rich Barsamian
VP Sales & Marketing

HOT PRODUCTS:
11-196 & 11-200 Circle Track Oil Pans
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Available for small-block Chevy applications; top sellers for racers who demand consistent oil control and durability; the 11-196 is a shallow "L"-style pan with an 8-quart system capacity; the 11-200 is a stock-appearing oil pan designed for pre-80s Chevys with left-side dipsticks.

Canton Racing Products
Christian Goncalves
Marketing Manager

HOT PRODUCTS:
Circle Track Racing Springs
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Competition-specific springs available for every form of circle track racing.

Eibach Inc.
David Cardey
Sales Manager

HOT PRODUCTS:
Safety Gear
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Stilo ST6 composite and carbon helmets are in demand in the high-end asphalt market; custom race suits are available with a wide range of options for different scales of economy; the presence of Hans IV restraint devices is also increasing at all levels.

Holley Performance Brands
Graham Fordyce
Circle Track Sales Manager

HOT PRODUCTS:
MPD82030 & MPD82032 7075 Billet Aluminum Front Torsion Arms
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Recently introduced, the arms reduce deflection, twist and bend when under load.

MPD Racing
Eddie Smith
Manager

HOT PRODUCTS:
Competition Oiling Components
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Popular choices include the 04-5056 series bell housing mount; dry sump pumps; 08-9016, 08-9018 and 08-9019 dry sump oil tanks; remote oil filter mount with oil pressure priming pump; lightweight PFS R4 oil pumps offer improved oil pressure and pull good vacuum.

Peterson Fluid Systems
Wade Moon
Technical Sales Manager

HOT PRODUCTS:
Competition Braking Components
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Popular offerings include XRZ calipers for pavement late-model racing; XR brake fluid; quick-disconnect, no-bleed fittings for brakes/clutches; and burnished rotors that allow customers to install and go race with no pre-bed.

Wilwood Racing
Dave Brzozowski
Motorsports/Racing Manager



These days, circle track racers are seeking products that deliver performance and durability. (Photo courtesy Advanced Clutch Technology)



Racers understand the value of quality parts. (Photos courtesy Canton Racing Products)

sport worth watching as well. In fact, speaking of watching, David Cardey, sales manager at Eibach Inc., points to the positive market impact of livestreamed races.

"The ability to watch local races anywhere across the country has helped racers and teams get better sponsorship, which helps fuel the market for better products," he notes.

And there are plenty of product innovations to celebrate as well, says Dave Brzozowski, motorsports/racing manager at Wilwood Racing, particularly "chassis and suspension development, tire construction and compounds, and shock technology."

READY TO RACE

Higher prices or not, when the new season rolls around, circle track racers are ready to race—and win.

"A common misconception is that circle track racers only care about price," says Goncalves. "Most racers actually understand the value of quality parts, especially when it comes to oil control and reliability. It's not about buying/selling the cheapest option; it's about helping them see how better-built components protect their engines and improve performance."

Understanding those components is important when selling to the circle track crowd, because most racers arrive at a shop with a good idea of what they want.

"Grassroots racers these days have so many tools at their disposal to educate themselves that they typically know more about their cars than we do as manufacturers," Cardey notes.

When selling to the circle track market, a subtle difference is considering performance over time, Barsamian explains.



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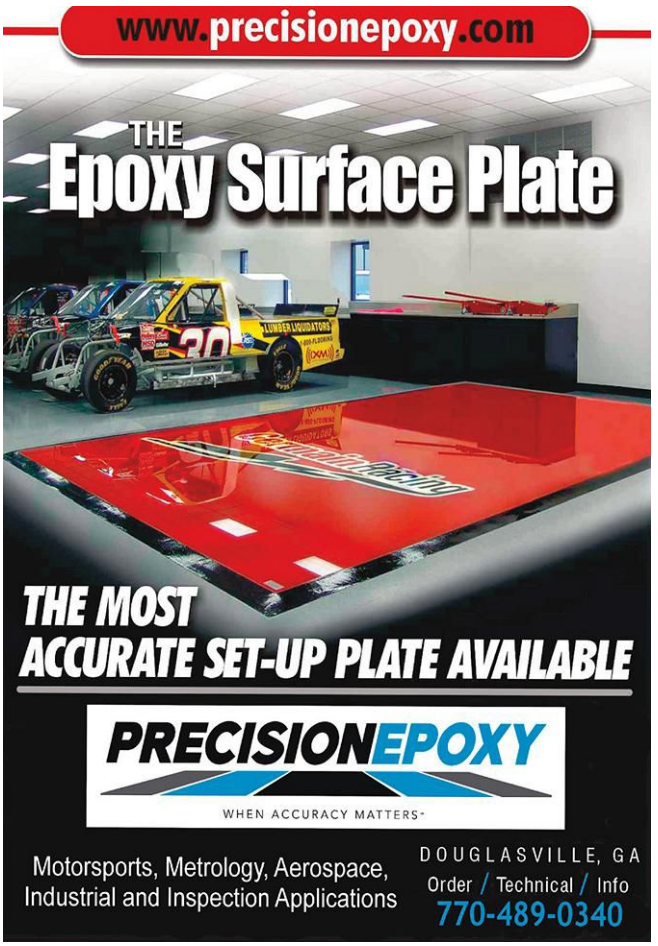


A shop's available inventory can include the safety equipment every competitor needs. (Photo courtesy Holley Performance Brands/stilohelmets.com)

"Most circle track racers—especially grassroots and regional-level—are far more focused on cost-per-lap, durability and ease of service than they are on squeezing out the last 2% or 3% of performance. The reason many shops misunderstand this is because they think like drag racers or road racers, where max performance parts equal more wins," he says. "Circle track has a different calculus—endurance, budget and predictability matter as much as raw horsepower or bite. Shops sometimes assume a racer won't mind an extra cost if the part is 'faster.' In truth, a racer might be more loyal to the shop that saves them money and downtime."

Smith says successful shops create a personal connection with their clients.

"Racers value advice and trust," he notes. "A knowledgeable salesperson can earn that trust when talking about products."



When it's time to get racers outfitted for the new year, the first step for shops is to do a little digging.

"Ask customers the type of oval racing they are doing—pavement or dirt, the size of the track they are primarily running on, type and class of car and which divisions," says Brzozowski. "What is the customer looking for and not asking enough questions about?"

Once they find the answer, a mistake some shops make, says Moon, is "not having parts that are more specific to circle track cars."

Available inventory can include the safety equipment every competitor needs, says Fordyce.

"Shops sometimes miss the intimate opportunities to make racers safer at the track," he observes. "Many shops and manufacturers miss the boat when it comes to working alongside race series to educate racers on better safety practices and technical safety inspections. Education is needed across the board for requirements with seats, belts, helmets and head and neck systems."

IN IT TO WIN IT

Shops that are actively involved with their local circle tracks have the inside line to increased sales, says Goncalves from Canton Racing Products.

"Little things such as attending events, sponsoring a few cars or staying active in online racing groups all make a difference," he says. "Racers want to buy from people who understand their world and can offer real advice. Building relationships and being a trusted resource is the best way to grow circle track sales."

MPD Racing's Smith says competitors want to buy from companies that are "part of their world, not just behind the counter or on a website. Speed shops looking to grow their circle track sales need to be seen and heard at the track. The best way to earn new business is to show up, attend local races, talk with teams and build



Talk to local teams and track owners for information on which circle track series and products are popular in your area. (Photo courtesy Peterson Fluid Systems)



Successful shops create a personal connection with their motorsports clients. (Photos courtesy MPD Racing)

relationships face-to-face."

Data gathering begins with shops getting to know their local circle tracks and learning which sanctioning bodies and classes run there to decide if it's worth getting involved, says Eibach's Cardey.

"Some of the car counts across the country might surprise people, and they do it three to four nights a week—that's potentially a lot of repeat business," he explains.

Knowing the types of race cars competing in your area, says Peterson Fluid Systems' Moon, allows shops to identify the parts racers use on a regular basis.

"Talk to local teams and track owners for information," he recommends.

Wilwood's Brzozowski is also a fan of shops focusing on the popular circle track racing programs in their area to gain a competitive advantage, adding that "racing subscriptions are a great resource."

Want to serve local racers even better? Why not hire one, asks Holley's Fordyce.

"They'll know the ins and outs and offer ways to build the business around the way they race. Most are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and then 5 p.m. to whenever getting their cars ready."

He also suggests "leaning on manufacturers" to learn the "tips and tricks to make racers safer and more comfortable."

Inside the shop, Barsamian from Advanced Clutch Technology recommends creating refresh and upgrade packages.

"The best way to serve circle track racers is to recommend parts that deliver the best balance of performance, durability and value for their specific level of racing," he says. "Doing so builds trust and long-term business. Instead of waiting for racers to come in when something breaks, bundle the common consumables they'll need over a season—clutch disc, pressure plate, throw-out bearing, flywheel bolts, fluids and maybe even spares like pads or filters—and market it as a 'Circle Track Season Kit.'" ***TS***



Product innovations help drive the circle track market. (Photo courtesy Wilwood Racing)





Ultra4 Racing is partnering with Backroads of Appalachia and the state of Kentucky to expand its national footprint through new development and training opportunities and a world-class Ultra4 Series race at Leatherwood Off-Road Park. (Photo courtesy Ultra4 Racing)

PERFORMANCE & RACING

Recent news from the world of motorsports, supercars & automotive culture.

ULTRA4 RACING OPENS EAST COAST HEADQUARTERS, PLANS OFF-ROAD RACE IN KENTUCKY

Ultra4 Racing, the series behind the annual King of the Hammers, is partnering with Backroads of Appalachia and the state of Kentucky to expand its national footprint through new development and training opportunities for teams and aspiring racers.

The organization also announced it will host a world-class Ultra4 Series race at Kentucky's Leatherwood Off-Road Park.

The partnership marks the creation of the East Coast headquarters for Ultra4 Racing at a newly constructed, 200-acre test and development facility in Booneville, Kentucky, featuring a dedicated 1.4-mile off-road test track and a 60,000-square-foot building with garage and office space. The facility, expected to open in 2026, will offer Ultra4 teams and OEMs a test and development arena in a safe and secure environment, according to officials.

The facility will also serve as the East Coast base for the youth-focused Ultra4 Next Training & Workforce Development Center. The initiative, which aligns with Backroads of Appalachia's mission to offer technical and trade skill development within the motorsports industry, will provide Appalachian youth access to hands-on experiences and career pathways into motorsports.

"We're tremendously excited to broaden our national footprint, and thankful for the opportunity," says Dave Cole, founder of Ultra4 and the King of the Hammers. "It is a big step forward for Ultra4 as we expand our reach and create new opportunities for racers, students and fans to be part of the action."

Meanwhile, the new Ultra4 race, slated for fall of 2026, will showcase the intensity and excitement of Ultra4 while further solidifying Kentucky's position as a premier off-road destination, organizers note. Kentucky's SB-63 legislation means tagged side-by-sides and off-road trucks will be permitted to legally transit and operate on public roads, allowing teams to set up operations directly in nearby towns and opening the door to greater community integration during events.

The project is funded by a $7.4 million grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission and is part of the Appalachian Overland Triangle initiative, which seeks to rebuild rural economies through motorsports and outdoor tourism. The grant was spearheaded by Backroads CEO Erik Hubbard and local politicians.

X-RAY ART EXHIBIT OFFERS INSIDE LOOK AT SCALE BUGATTIS

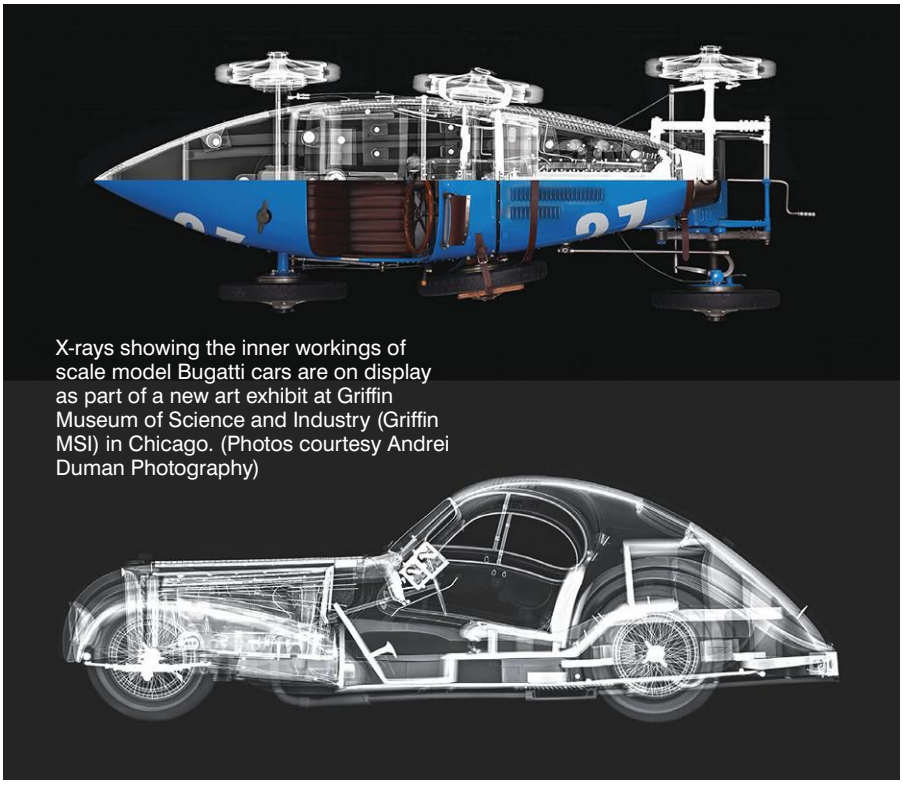
For the first time, some of the world's most treasured artifacts and automotive icons are being revealed in a new light. This fall, Griffin Museum of Science and Industry (Griffin MSI) in Chicago opened "Beyond the Surface: The Art of X-rays," an immersive exhibition showcasing never-before-seen X-ray imagery of historical objects, including scale models of legendary Bugatti cars, captured in fine detail by the artisans at Amalgam Collection.

Visitors uncover the history and science of X-rays, from their advent at the tail end of the 19th century through their modern, more artistic uses. Alongside the X-ray photography portfolio of Andrei Duman, the exhibit features never-before-imaged artifacts from Griffin MSI's collection, including the original M4 Enigma Machine from U-Boat 505 (on loan from the National Cryptological Museum), a souvenir photographic box camera from the 1933 Century of Progress World's Fair and original Thomas Edison lightbulbs from 1893. A dedicated gallery within the exhibition highlights six 1:8 scale Bugatti models, developed under exclusive license with Bugatti and Amalgam Collection.

The physical precision of the fine art models is on display, while Duman's imagery reveals their inner structures, capturing both the engineering brilliance and racing DNA of one of the world's most revered marques.

The selection spans Bugatti's icons, from the 1926 Targa Florio-winning Type 35 and the 1937 Le Mans-winning Type 57G "Tank," to the legendary Type 57SC Atlantic and the modern-day Chiron.

"We are delighted to see our Bugatti models showcased in such an innovative setting at Griffin MSI. From the outset, Andrei's fascination with X-ray photography resonated with us, and his work reveals a new dimension of artistry and engineering within these cars, perfectly reflecting our mission to capture every unseen detail in miniature," says Sandy Copeman, founder of Amalgam Collection. "To be part of an exhibition that unites science, design and history in Chicago, a city with such a proud tradition of innovation, is a true honor."



X-rays showing the inner workings of scale model Bugatti cars are on display as part of a new art exhibit at Griffin Museum of Science and Industry (Griffin MSI) in Chicago. (Photos courtesy Andrei Duman Photography)



A dedicated gallery within the exhibition highlights six 1:8 scale Bugatti models, developed under exclusive license with Bugatti and Amalgam Collection. (Photos courtesy Griffin MSI)



MCLAREN'S 'ENDURANCE' ROAD TRIP CELEBRATES 1995 LE MANS VICTORY



McLaren's "States of Endurance" road trip brought the excitement of its vehicles and the thrill of endurance racing to fans across the U.S. (Photo courtesy McLaren/Newspress USA)

McLaren's "States of Endurance" road trip spanned 3,867 miles across eight U.S. states, celebrating 30 years since the brand's iconic 1995 Le Mans victory. Three McLaren supercars—a 750S Coupe and Spider and an Artura Spider—driven by McLaren pro and trophy drivers Paul Rees, Jack Barlow and Oliver Webb made fan-focused pit stops at McLaren retailers nationwide, from Monterey to Miami.

Organizers say the States of Endurance cars—in liveries representing the dawn, day and night phases of a 24-hour race—are "showcases of how racing DNA and the endurance mindset consolidate in lightweight supercars of meticulous quality that can deliver not only thrilling track performance when demanded, but an unforgettable driving experience to the destination."

Beginning in Monterey, California, the event made stops in Newport Beach, California; Scottsdale, Arizona; Dallas; Atlanta; Orlando; and Miami. Each "pit stop" offered supercar enthusiasts and motorsports fans the opportunity to engage with the drivers and cars, and McLaren owner convoys joined parts of the journey.

The route was plotted not only to bring the trip directly to the McLaren community and clients, officials note, but also to eclipse the distance typically driven by cars competing in the Le Mans 24 hours.

"Endurance racing represents McLaren's tenacity, and the States of Endurance journey is a perfect intersection of our endurance heritage with the cutting-edge engineering, technologies and uncompromising standards that make our supercars capable of experiences that still resonate with the driver long after the journey ends," says Henrik Wilhelmsmeyer, chief commercial officer, McLaren Automotive. "We have brought our community of passionate fans and clients together to experience the thrill and resilience that defines McLaren, while our States of Endurance drivers have discovered for themselves how endurance can transcend beyond the track, to be feeling—a mindset to live by."

PORSCHE MOTORSPORT NARROWS FOCUS TO IMSA, FORMULA E


Next year, Porsche Motorsport will concentrate on competing with its 963 in the North American IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship and the 99X Electric in the ABB FIA Formula E World Championship. (Photo courtesy Porsche Motorsport)

As part of a comprehensive realignment, Porsche AG will focus on two factory motorsports projects heading into the new year. Porsche Motorsport will concentrate on competing with the 963 in the North American IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship, and with the Porsche 99X Electric in the ABB FIA Formula E World Championship.

In Formula E, Porsche is gaining valuable insights for its electric production sports cars, according to company officials. The fourth generation of Formula E cars will be introduced for Season 13 (2026-27), bringing further development freedom and allowing Porsche to achieve an even steeper learning curve for its all-electric production vehicles.

"In this competitive environment, we will continue to drive forward the development of high-performance vehicles," said Dr. Michael Steiner, member of the executive board for development at Porsche AG.

With its involvement in the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship, which features the 24 Hours of Daytona as its highlight race, Porsche is underlining the importance of the North American market and endurance racing for the brand. In addition to the two factory commitments in Formula E and IMSA, customer racing remains an important pillar of the Porsche motorsport strategy, according to the carmaker.

Meanwhile, Porsche Penske Motorsport will end its involvement in the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) at the end of the current season.

"We very much regret that, due to the current circumstances, we will not be continuing our involvement in the WEC after this season," Steiner said.

Motorsports has always been an essential part of the Porsche brand, officials note.

"We use motorsport as a development platform for future technology and to illustrate the potential of our sports cars," said Thomas Laudenbach, vice president, Porsche Motorsport. "With the Porsche 963 in the North American IMSA series and the Porsche 99X Electric in the Formula E World Championship, we want to continue to fight for overall victories in the future. That is our tradition and our focus."

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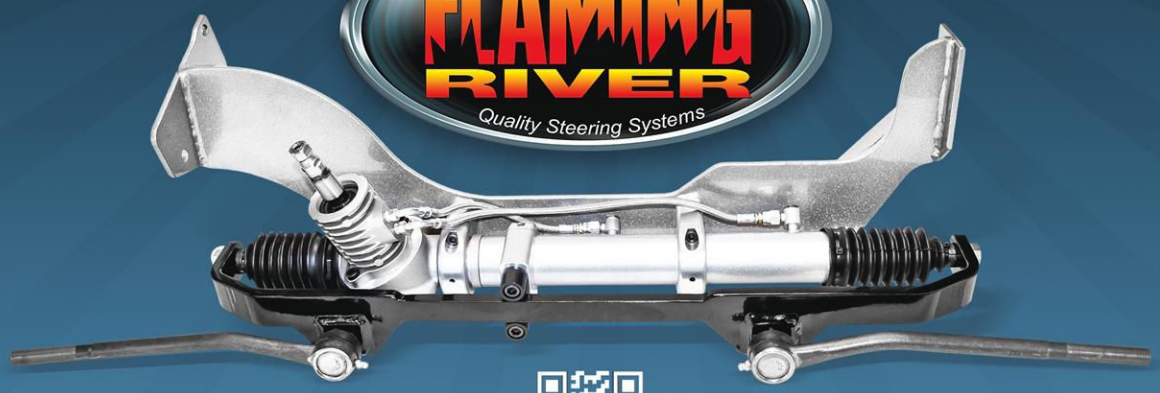


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RACING LEGEND AYRTON SENNA CONTINUES TO RESONATE WITH AMERICAN ENTHUSIASTS



Recent media projects have fueled renewed interest in three-time F1 World Champion Aryton Senna. (Photo by Norio Koike @ASE 2025)



"Senna Driven" is an electronic music album featuring artists like Armin Van Buuren that blends original audio of Senna with exclusive music tracks. (Photo by @luansloboda)

If it seems like you've heard a lot about racing legend Aryton Senna recently, you're not alone. A nationwide study commissioned by the SENNA brand reveals that 7 out of 10 Americans ages 18-29 are familiar with the Brazilian F1 driver—and his prominence is growing.

Recent media projects have fueled renewed interest in the three-time F1 world champion. In "F1: The Movie" starring Brad Pitt, Senna shares the track with rookie Sonny Hayes. More than just a rival, Senna is referenced throughout the film—both explicitly and through subtle nods that long-time fans will recognize.

"Senna is the pinnacle—the very top, regarded as one of the greatest of all time. In this film, we're paying tribute to the best," said Pitt in an interview with Brazilian audiences at the film's premiere earlier this year. The film was coproduced by seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton, a lifelong Senna admirer.

Meanwhile, the Netflix limited series "Senna," released in late 2024, became a global hit, surpassing 37 million watch hours in the first two weeks and topping non-English language series charts worldwide. The series also helped expand Senna's engagement—according to brand research, 70% of Americans who know Senna discovered him in the past five years, and 85% of viewers finished the final Netflix episode wanting to learn more about the driver's journey.

Today, SENNA—a global brand inspired by Senna's legacy—has a portfolio of more than 65 partners. It launches new product collections across diverse categories every year with brands such as Tag Heuer, McLaren and Ducati. The McLaren Lego set, for instance, sold out in stores, while the full-scale McLaren supercar, priced at over $1 million, sold half of its 500 global units in the United States alone. Ducati, another long-standing brand partner, saw all 341 units of its Monster Senna motorcycle model acquired within 48 hours, with one-fifth of the production going to American buyers.

Meanwhile, Senna, who passed away in 1994 after an accident at the San Marino Grand Prix, became the first motorsports figure to appear in the Minecraft video game, while "Senna Driven," an electronic music album featuring artists like Armin Van Buuren and Alok that blends original Senna audio with exclusive tracks, has surpassed 10 million global streams, with the U.S. being the second-largest market for listeners, behind only Brazil.

The SENNA brand also plays a transformative social role, as a percentage of its profits is donated to the Aryton Senna Institute. For over 30 years, the institute has worked to improve public education in Brazil, positively impacting more than 39 million children.



Senna became the first motorsports figure to appear in the Minecraft video game. (Photo courtesy SENNA)

WARHOL'S BMW ART CAR DISPLAYED AT WASHINGTON D.C. POP-UP MUSEUM



Andy Warhol's 1979 BMW M1 Art Car No. 4 is the 37th vehicle added to the National Historic Vehicle Register and was displayed in September in Washington, D.C., by the Hagerty Drivers Foundation. (Photos courtesy Hagerty Drivers Foundation)

The Hagerty Drivers Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to preserving automotive culture and history, hosted its annual "Cars at the Capital" exhibition featuring a world-renowned piece of automotive art by the iconic Andy Warhol—the 1979 BMW M1 Art Car No. 4.

Staged at the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in September, the vehicle was displayed in the foundation's brilliantly lit glass enclosure and became the 37th vehicle added to the National Historic Vehicle Register.

The car's documentation will be permanently archived in the U.S. Library of Congress.

Warhol, the celebrated Pittsburgh-born artist, gave the BMW M1 factory race car an elaborate pop-art makeover in '79, adding to the significant BMW Art Car Collection started in 1975 and creating one of the most significant automotive works of art known today, according to officials. The car is more than just a work of art, however—it also raced in the 1979 24 Hours of Le Mans, continuing the legacy set in motion with the first Art Car and finishing sixth overall and second in its class.

Its combination of artistic, cultural and racing pedigrees makes it a natural fit for the National Historic Vehicle Register.

Said Warhol at the time: "I attempted to show speed as a visual image. When the automobile is really traveling fast, all the lines and colors are transformed in a blur."

Since 1975, renowned artists from around the world have created BMW Art Cars. The idea emerged thanks to French racing driver and art enthusiast Hervé Poulain, who, in collaboration with Jochen Neerpasch, then head of motorsport at BMW, invited his friend and artist Alexander Calder to paint a car. The result was a BMW 3.0 CSL that participated in the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1975, captivating the public and marking the birth of the BMW Art Car Collection.

Famous figures such as Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Esther Mahlangu, David Hockney, Jenny Holzer and Ólafur Elïasson have since enriched the collection with their unique styles.

"The Warhol BMW M1 is arguably the most iconic example in the Art Car series," says Casey Maxon, director of heritage at Hagerty. "The National Historic Vehicle Register features many different eras and cultural touch points of our automotive past. The Warhol M1 represents the confluence of great German engineering, fabulous Italian design, performance on the global stage and the lasting influence of the dynamic American pop-art scene."

The D.C. exhibition was located just steps from the Smithsonian museums.



2026 ROLEX MONTEREY MOTORSPORTS REUNION WILL CELEBRATE JAPANESE CLASSICS

On the heels of a successful 2025 Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion, WeatherTech Raceway Laguna Seca has announced that it will celebrate icons of Japanese motorsports as the featured marque for its 2026 gathering.

Next year's event, slated for Aug. 12-15, 2026, promises dozens of legendary machines from Japanese motor racing history, featuring iconic vehicles from Mazda, Toyota, Yamaha, Honda, Nissan, Lexus, Acura, Infiniti, Mitsubishi and more. The celebration will embrace the diversity of all forms of motorsport where Japanese brands have excelled, including INDYCAR, NASCAR, Formula 1, Formula E, endurance racing, sportscar racing, off-road, rally, motorcycle, drifting and more, according to event officials.

"As a Japanese driver, it is an honor to see Japan's racing heritage recognized as the featured marque at Monterey's historic reunion. Japanese cars and motorcycles have long carried the spirit of innovation and passion onto racetracks worldwide, and I am proud to see this legacy celebrated on such a prestigious stage," said two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Takuma Sato, who was on hand for the announcement at WeatherTech Raceway Laguna Seca after piloting Nigel Mansell's 1986 Williams FW11 for on-track demonstration laps. "It reflects how far our motorsport culture has come, and it inspires the next generation of Japanese drivers and riders to carry this legacy forward on the world stage."



Next year's 2026 Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion at WeatherTech Raceway Laguna Seca will celebrate icons of Japanese motorsports. (Photo courtesy Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion/Mike Garrett)

The Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion is an annual high-speed exhibition featuring authentic and period-correct racing machines.

HISTORIC SPORTSCAR RACING PARTNERS WITH DOWNFORCE MOTORSPORTS



Historic Sportscar Racing announced a new multiyear partnership that names Downforce Motorsports, a Superformance retailer, the Official Performance Vehicle Partner of HSR. (Photos courtesy HSR)

Historic Sportscar Racing (HSR) announced a new multiyear partnership that names Downforce Motorsports the Official Performance Vehicle Partner of HSR. Officials say the collaboration underscores a shared mission to honor motorsports' golden eras by celebrating the cars, craftsmanship and stories that continue to define performance today.

Founded in 2019 by Navy veteran Dan Long, Downforce Motorsports has grown into the nation's largest independent dealership of Superformance vehicles, including both new and pre-owned GT40s, Cobras, Shelby

Daytonas and Corvette Grand Sports. With showroom locations in Wisconsin and South Carolina, Downforce Motorsports also serves as an official Shelby American dealer, offering a selection of heritage builds and modern performance solutions.

"Downforce Motorsports and HSR are cut from the same cloth," says Long. "We are both passionate about celebrating history while driving it forward. Our partnership ensures that the iconic cars we deliver—GT40s, Cobras and Daytonas—are showcased in the most authentic setting possible, surrounded by people who truly understand and appreciate their legacy."

Downforce Motorsports has also distinguished itself as a marketplace for historic race vehicles and racing heritage-inspired cars with innovative replica race liveries—such as the legendary Ken Miles 1966-designed GT40—and engine packages that range from traditional period-correct builds to modern Ford Performance crate engines like the Aluminator 52XS.

The partnership is expected to produce collaborative features from Downforce Motorsports and HSR in the paddock, on social media and through custom video segments at events, officials stated.

"HSR welcomes Downforce Motorsports into our growing family of partners," says John Doonan, HSR president. "Dan and his team embody the spirit of heritage, craftsmanship and performance that defines our paddocks. Their presence not only enhances the experience for our competitors and fans but also connects an affluent, enthusiast-driven audience with some of the most legendary performance cars ever built. This is a natural and exciting collaboration." ***TS***









Both Jim and James have spent time leading the California Independent Funny Car Association and can often be found racing each other at CIFCA events. (Photos courtesy Tony Thacker & Good Vibrations Motorsports)

Still Feeling Those GoodVIBRATIONS

A visit to the last LA speed shop.

BY 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.

Whittier, California, is a quiet-ish community east of Los Angeles known as the place where President Richard Nixon was raised and went to college. Both before and after World War II, Whittier was also one of LA's hot rod epicenters and home to luminaries such as Ak Miller, Speed-O-Motive and Taylor Engines.

Today, in a nondescript building, down a nondescript alley, is the home of Good Vibrations Motorsports (GVM), arguably the last real speed shop in Los Angeles. In 2024, the shop celebrated its 35th anniversary.

Besides the Beach Boys' 1967 hit, "Good Vibrations" is also the name of Jim and Marion Maher's blown alcohol, Corvette-bodied Funny Car (FC). Let's back up though. Before he was a speed shop owner, Jim was an engineer at Rockwell helping build giant vibrators for aerospace testing.

"Yes, we built huge 'shakers' used to simulate real-world vibration environments and assess the durability, reliability and structural integrity of components, subsystems and complete systems," he says. "'Good Vibrations' seemed a good name for the race car, and it stuck."

The Mahers began racing in 1984 with the California Injected Funny Car Association (CIFCA), a West Coast drag racing group that, 40 years later, still organizes affordable FC shows. In 1989, the year he left aerospace, Jim established Good Vibrations Motorsports and became the president of CIFCA, a position he held for 20 years. (The "I" in CIFCA, meanwhile, changed from standing for "Injected" to "Independent.")



Jim Maher, right, opened Good Vibrations Motorsports in LA in 1989. His son, James, left, joined the business in 2008, and GVM still serves racers today.

THE FAST TRACK TO A NEW BUSINESS

Maher says his business grew out of racing.

"It was Jim Deist and Joe Hansen that got me started by getting me to take their



The shop in Whittier, California, encompasses approximately 13,000 square feet and is "stocked to the rafters."



GVM knows that when it comes to selling race parts, clients most likely needed it yesterday.

safety equipment to sell at Southern California events on consignment," he recalls. "I became known as the go-to guy at the races. Then we began to set up at the Long Beach and Pomona swap meets and it grew from there."

Maher soon added JAZ Products, and then supercharger parts from BDS and Enderle's mechanical fuel injection line. That's when things really began to take off.

"Soon, I had to move out of my small, home garage—I called it a 'closet'—and, in 1991, got my first, 2,000-square-foot building. Now, we have approximately 13,000 square feet and we are stocked to the rafters."

Maher and the Corvette dominated the CIFCA series in 1992, winning seven of 10 races. A year later, CIFCA (cifca.com) expanded its horizons to Mexico with four- and eight-car races in Aqua Prieta, Mexicali and Tecate, as well as holding more than a dozen competitions stateside. Things got busy in '98 when there were more than 40 teams on the CIFCA roster, and it continued to grow through the end of the decade.

Later, during the 2004 season, 30 out of 44 teams made it to the track and, with 14 events to manage, it was all getting to be a bit much for Maher who, after winning his fifth championship, decided it was time to focus on his family and his growing business. After 20 years, he stepped down and Jamie Leppanen became CIFCA president.

Meanwhile, GVM was booming—especially as other LA-area speed shops aged out, closed or succumbed to large mail-order houses. Meanwhile, Maher's son, James, joined the business in 2008 and also stepped in to help revitalize CIFCA.

"In 2014, Diego Zuniga called and asked if I could put on a CIFCA race at Sacramento. I thought long and hard and eventually we came up with a number that would work and after many months of work we gathered nine Funnies for a 30th anniversary race that was won by Mike Troxel," says James. "In 2024 we celebrated our 40th anniversary of the circuit and I was able to win back-to-back championships."

CONTINUED RACING SUPPORT

In 2015, GVM (goodvibesracing.com) became the title sponsor of the 57th Annual March Meet at Famoso Dragstrip. Tracing its roots back to 1959 and the Smokers Car Club U.S. Fuel & Gas Championships, the March



A key to success is keeping quality parts in stock.



The speed shop got its start selling products at events and still maintains an outside presence at races and shows.

Meet without a doubt is the biggest event on the nostalgia drag racing calendar. Despite being at the beginning of the season, it's the one to win.

GVM brought a new level of sponsor participation to the Famoso event with a large hospitality area that offered not only parts sales but also tech support, meetings with industry reps, a full-size reaction time simulator, phone charging station, free stuff and, most importantly for the racers, a solid contingency program. The speed shop is now also the presenting sponsor of the California Hot Rod Reunion, the nostalgia season finale.

"Our business is worldwide," says James Maher. "It varies, of course, but exports account for more than 30% of our sales, with our biggest customer being Australia—we do a lot of business with Joe Blo Speed Shop in Queensland, Australia."

Shipping parts can be costly, he admits, but with the advent of alternatives such as InXpress or even ShipStation, GVM often finds a price-effective solution and passes on any manufacturer discounts.

"Our main advantage is having it on the shelf—the right inventory is key," says James. "Racers typically need it yesterday. Pre-COVID, we carried three to six months of inventory, but we found during COVID that we needed six to 12 months, and we've kept it that way. We're also very loyal to our suppliers and typically only have one supplier per category. For example, we stock XRP hose fittings, as they are made from high-quality 2024 aluminum."

Coincidentally, the shop also makes its own hoses from time to time.

"If we have a customer that needs their hoses replaced then we will try to accommodate them," he explains. "For example, we have a tractor puller customer whose rig has three motors, and we recently serviced all three of his injector hats. Monster trucks are equally big, if not bigger. Feld Entertainment operates some 70 trucks for which they have more than 100 engines—that's a lot of parts."

STEPPING IN, STEPPING UP

The demand for specialty parts has led GVM to use U.S. manufacturers whenever possible, allowing more control over quality and supply.

"A lot of our blower parts come from IAM. They have made over 40,000 blower pulleys for us," James reports. "We also work very closely with Enderle Fuel Injection. We stock both new and used parts and are Enderle's largest authorized dealer. In fact, although I have no formal training, I went to Enderle in 2020 after they had a big embezzlement issue. Shortly after the embezzlement, they had a few other main employees leave, which left a giant void in the company. I was basically just a consultant for them and helped get their computers and systems up to the 21st century (standards), as they were a little behind the times. I also was able to get Kasey Smith hired as their general manager. Kasey worked for us at GVM for 15 years and was the perfect guy for the job."

One current trend James identifies is that the industry is slowly moving away from mechanical and toward electronic fuel injection (EFI).

"We have developed our own billet upright injectors," he notes. "Even the monster trucks are going to EFI as it helps them use less fuel, be more efficient and reduce emissions, which is important in stadium events."

When he's not running the shop, developing products or spending time with his growing family, James remains busy with CIFCA, often racing his father, Jim. In fact, they faced off three times last year, with James winning two.

The 2024 CIFCA points championship came down to the last race of the year, where Jim and James competed in the first round of eliminations. James won that race and clinched his third CIFCA championship.

"I think it's the racing involvement that gives Good Vibrations an edge," James says. "Dad and I are racers, and we understand what racers need—they need it now and they need a good price—and we strive to deliver both." ***TS***

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GM 2500 Big Brake Kits

Wilwood, Camarillo, California, presents a new TX6R Tactical Xtreme Rear Big Brake Kit option to complement existing front TX6-DM direct spindle-mount performance brake kits on 2020-24 GM 2500 trucks. Upgrading late-model GM HD 2500 trucks from smaller OE cast iron calipers and rotors to Wilwood six-piston radial mount calipers and larger rotors provides increased brake torque, thermal capacity and driving confidence for heavy-duty highway use, hauling, towing, off-road use and mountain driving.



Dual-Action Wipes

Tub O' Towels, Cleveland, a **FedPro** brand, presents its new, dual-action Tub O' Towels Heavy-Duty Dual Textured Wipes. Manufactured in the U.S., the 10-by-12-inch wipes have a rough and a smooth side and can be used to clean large surfaces. They include the company's Bond Buster formula designed to cut through grease, grime and tough stains, and feature aloe, Vitamin E and lanolin, and a fresh lemon scent. The wipes come packaged in a 75-count heavy-duty canister.

KIA K4 Cat-Back Exhaust

BORLA Performance Industries, Johnson City, Tennessee, presents its Axle-Back Exhaust System for 2025 Kia K4 models that improves horsepower and torque. System 11991 delivers the classic S-Type sound with no drone or resonance inside the vehicle. Made from T-304 stainless steel, the system features a brushed turn-down tip and all-welded construction for durability and long life.



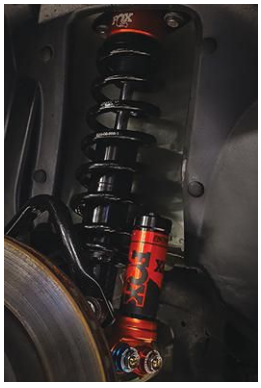


Classic Vehicle Radio

Custom Autosound Mfg., Fullerton, California, presents the USA4-DIN Radio for classic cars, trucks and street rods. With a DIN opening (7.2-by-2.11-inch) fitting most 1984 and newer vehicles, the unit blends modern convenience with a classic look. The flip-down digital display reveals a hidden CD player, while built-in Bluetooth offers streaming and hands-free calling. USB and AUX inputs are tucked neatly into the front panel, and the RDS tuner displays artist and song information. Choose from black or chrome finishes.

Automotive Shocks

FOX, Scotts Valley, California, presents its 2.0 Automotive Shocks, created to improve sports car ride dynamics on track days and handle unpredictable pavement in performance-oriented daily drivers. The Factory Race Series shocks feature the X2 four-way damper, coupling twin-tube shock architecture with independently adjustable compression and rebound to provide motorsports-caliber damping. After a track day, use the X2 adjuster to quickly change the setup for a comfortable drive home. Applications include Chevrolet Corvette and Dodge Challenger/Charger models.



Premium Diesel Exhaust Fluid Treatment

Hot Shot's Secret, Mt. Gilead, Ohio, presents its new Diesel Exhaust Fluid (DEF) treatment. Premium DEFender is a targeted additive formulated to clean, protect and enhance DEF and the SCR emissions systems. Designed to prevent and eliminate crystallization buildup in DEF injectors and lines and restore proper DEF spray patterns, it also provides lubricity to DEF system components, helping protect sensitive pumps and injectors from wear, extending service life. One 8-ounce bottle treats 20 gallons of DEF.

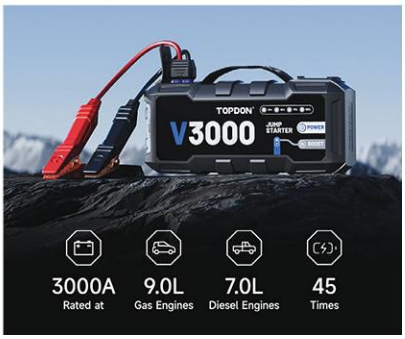




Apprentice Vises

WILTON, La Vergne, Tennessee, presents its Apprentice Vise line. Featuring a fully enclosed bullet design for long-term durability and optimal clamp forces, the vises include a precision slide bar for smooth operation, secure mechanical locking base with 360-degree swivel, replaceable jaws made from hardened steel, large integrated anvil work surface, dual lockdowns and a four-bolt mounting pattern. They are available in 4-, 6- and 5-1/2-inch multipurpose models.

Professional-Grade Jump-Starter



TOPDON US, Rockaway, New Jersey, presents its V3000 professional-grade lithium jump-starter with a 3,000-amp peak current backed by a 24,000mAh lithium-ion battery. An upgraded version of TOPDON's JS3000 model, the V3000 is a compact jump-starter designed for use on large marine and transport vehicles, as well as heavy-duty agricultural and farming equipment. It can jump-start 12V vehicles with gasoline engines up to 9.0L and diesel engines up to 7.0L and also serves as a power bank with a USB Quick Charge 3.0 and 60W fast-charging Type-C port.



Full System Diagnostic Scanner

YOUCANIC, Towson, Maryland, presents the UCAN-II-C, a full-system, bidirectional diagnostic scanner engineered in the USA. Designed to deliver dealer-level diagnostics with no subscription fees, it offers free lifetime updates and support for more than 40 service functions, allowing techs to run active tests, perform maintenance reset and interact with a vehicle's systems in real time through a user-friendly interface. It covers a wide variety of vehicles including domestic, Asian and European models and delivers fast scan speeds.



Track-Focused Tire

Pirelli North America, Rome, Georgia, presents its P ZERO TROFEO TRACK, a DOT-marked, track-focused tire engineered specifically for the U.S. market. Designed to excel in dry conditions, the tire was developed for club racers, amateur motorsport enthusiasts and serious track-day drivers, delivering sharp handling, added grip and consistency lap after lap, all while maintaining DOT compliance for sanctioned racing events.

Raptor OBD Unlock



COBB Tuning, Austin, Texas, presents its expanded Accessport support for 2023 Ford F-150 Raptor models and updated support for 2021-22 Gen-3 Raptors, now featuring OBD-based ECU unlock and performance gains of up to 55-plus hp and 65-plus pound-feet of torque with Stage 1 maps. Drivers can access COBB performance maps through the OBD port in minutes, with no downtime or shipping delays. Map options include 91- and 93-octane calibrations, towing-specific maps, and economy and valet modes, available as a standalone upgrade or as part of a COBB Stage Package.



Street Carburetors

JEGS, Delaware, Ohio, presents its Street Fighter Carburetor Series. Engineered for street machines, muscle cars and performance-minded daily drivers, the carburetors combine reliability, ease of use and high-performance features at a competitive price point. Wet-flow tested to ensure performance and reliability out of the box, the carbs are calibrated with a smooth, crisp throttle response and include full and timed vacuum ports for ignition advance. Features include a durable, bright polished finish, external float adjustment and sight glass. ***TS***



Automotive Influencers: A Personality for Promotion

High-profile users have brought new levels of visibility, transparency & engagement to the aftermarket.

BY JEF WHITE

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the second in a two-part series examining the impact of automotive influencers on the specialty automotive aftermarket. Part I, focusing on supplier relationships, appeared in the November 2025 issue of THE SHOP magazine.*

Long before she was a well-known social media influencer, Kris was just another avid off-roader, having fun and making friends on the trail.

"People would stop me and want to look closely at my 4Runner to get ideas on how to build up their trucks," recalls Kris, who goes by the handle Theee.Kris. "Over time, my 4Runner truly became a rolling billboard on the trails."

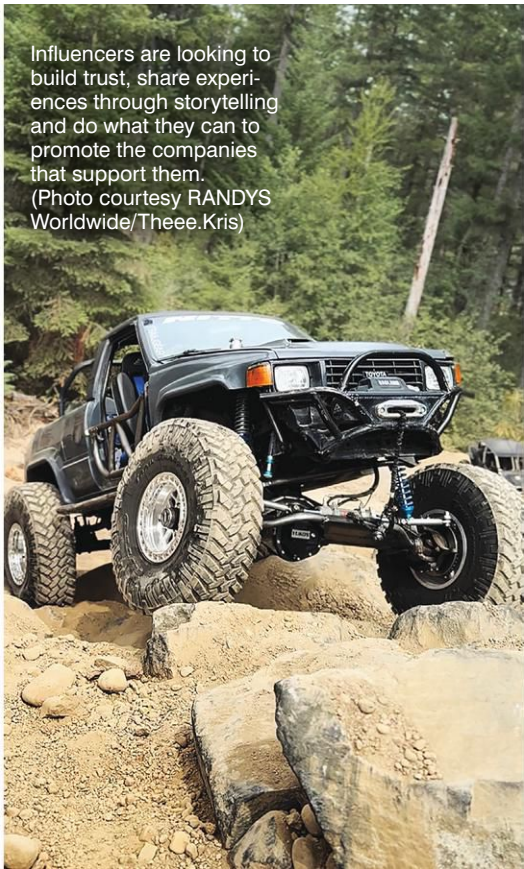
Among the products they'd find were Trail-Gear components. Kris ran the company's parts for years before looking into a more official partnership, which came about three years ago when she was brought on as a sponsored driver.

The results soon spoke for themselves, as her followers on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube helped generate more than $40,000 in revenue for Trail-Gear within the first year using her personalized discount code.

"I truly believe this not only represents reach, but also trust," she says. "It just shows that real connections with the community can truly drive positive results for the brands I believe in."

While sometimes dismissed as nothing more than enthusiasts looking to score free parts, Kris says true influencers "put in the time, work and creative effort to deliver value for both the brand and their audience. I am all about building trust, sharing my experiences by telling a story and doing anything I can to invest in my relationship with the company. Personally, I am very selective about who I choose to build a partnership with. I'm always looking for true alignment and mutual trust."

Enthusiasts and professionals alike have shown a real appetite for online content—everything from custom builds to product reviews to adventure reports. For the creators, it's a mix of work and play—shooting



Influencers are looking to build trust, share experiences through storytelling and do what they can to promote the companies that support them. (Photo courtesy RANDYS Worldwide/Theee.Kris)



photos and videos and compiling information on the trips their followers hope to one day duplicate or emulate, while also repping the products and brands that support their efforts.

"With every build and every rig I take out on the trails, I see it as an opportunity to place a spotlight on the companies I truly believe in. I don't just see them as parts that I use to complete my builds, but as parts that are manufactured by brands that I trust, with quality, reliability and performance being their top priorities," says Kris. "Featuring them on my rigs is about showcasing who's behind my builds and giving credit to the companies and products that play a huge role in making my dream projects a reality. It's my way of saying that I absolutely believe in these brands, and I trust them enough to run them on my rigs. That's huge, because all of my builds mean the world to me."

HELP ME DO IT MYSELF

Racers and other gearheads sharing endorsements of their favorite car parts and brands is obviously nothing new. Asked why the automotive aftermarket seems to support so many high-profile spokespeople, influencer Natasha Adams suggests it comes down to enthusiasts seeking information and motivation so that they can try things themselves.

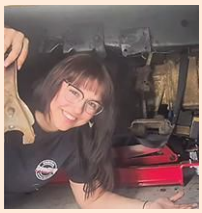
(Continued on page 36)



Trusted automotive influencers like Theee. Kris put in the time, work and creative effort needed to deliver value for their brands and audience. (Photo courtesy RANDYS Worldwide/Theee.Kris)

INFLUENCER PARTNERS

NATASHA ADAMS



- **INSTAGRAM:** @NATASHADDAMS (244,000 FOLLOWERS)
- **YOUTUBE:** @NATASHASPICKUPS (16,000 SUBSCRIBERS)
- **YEARS INVOLVED WITH THE SPECIALTY AUTO AFTERMARKET:** 4
- **COMPANY/BRAND PARTNERS:**
  - KC HILITES
  - BARNES 4WD
  - CARPARTS.COM
  - CAPRI TOOLS
  - HEAT WAVE VISUAL
  - VINTAGE & YOUNG
  - RUSTY'S OFF-ROAD PRODUCTS
  - RACELINE WHEELS
  - PRP SEATS

JULIE HEYER AQUAJEEPGIRL



- **FACEBOOK:** AQUA JEEPGIRL (7,000 FOLLOWERS)
- **INSTAGRAM:** @AQUAJEEPGIRL (62,800 FOLLOWERS)
- **TIKTOK:** #AQUAJEEPGIRL (12,500 FOLLOWERS)
- **YOUTUBE:** @AQUAJEEPGIRL8842 (1,000 SUBSCRIBERS)
- **YEARS INVOLVED WITH THE SPECIALTY AUTO AFTERMARKET:** 5
- **COMPANY/BRAND PARTNERS:**
  - DYNATRAC
  - YUKON GEAR & AXLE
  - BILSTEIN
  - GENRIGHT OFF ROAD
  - RPM STEERING & SUSPENSION
  - PRP SEATS
  - BATTLE BORN WHEELS
  - CENTERFORCE CLUTCHES
  - BAJA DESIGNS
  - BESTOP
  - MICKEY THOMPSON TIRES

KRIS THEEE.KRIS



- **INSTAGRAM:** @THEEE.KRIS (25,400 FOLLOWERS)
- **TIKTOK:** THEEE.KRIS (2,800 FOLLOWERS)
- **YOUTUBE:** THEEE.KRISSS (2,700 SUBSCRIBERS)
- **YEARS INVOLVED WITH THE SPECIALTY AUTO AFTERMARKET:** 5
- **COMPANY/BRAND PARTNERS:**
  - YUKON GEAR & AXLE
  - NITTO TIRE
  - TRAIL-GEAR
  - PRP SEATS
  - OUTLAW OVERLAND
  - SPARTAN ROPE

DOMINIC KNIGHT ADVENTURESBYKNIGHT



- **INSTAGRAM:** @ADVENTURESBYKNIGHT (32,600 FOLLOWERS)
- **YEARS INVOLVED WITH THE SPECIALTY AUTO AFTERMARKET:** 4
- **COMPANY/BRAND PARTNERS:**
  - YUKON GEAR & AXLE
  - NITTO TIRE
  - KC HILITES
  - MORRFLATE

MARK ROY SPARTACUS THE JT



- **FACEBOOK:** SPARTACUSTHEJT (1,000 FOLLOWERS)
- **INSTAGRAM:** @SPARTACUS_THE_JT (30,000 FOLLOWERS)
- **TIKTOK:** SPARTACUSTHEJT (1,500 FOLLOWERS)
- **YEARS INVOLVED WITH THE SPECIALTY AUTO AFTERMARKET:** 7
- **COMPANY/BRAND PARTNERS:**
  - YUKON GEAR & AXLE
  - DYNATRAC
  - ICON VEHICLE DYNAMICS
  - MOTOBILT
  - PRP SEATS
  - BAJA DESIGNS
  - SPOD
  - RPM STEERING & SUSPENSION
  - BESTOP
  - WARN INDUSTRIES
  - FACTOR 55
  - EZ FLATE
  - CONQUERED TRAILZ

MARVIN STAMMEL FLEX, ROCKS & ROLLOVERS



- **FACEBOOK:** FLEXROCKSROLLOVERS (185,000 FOLLOWERS)
- **INSTAGRAM:** @FLEXROCKROLLOVERS (141,000 FOLLOWERS)
- **YOUTUBE:** @FLEXROCKSROLLOVERS (143,000 SUBSCRIBERS)
- **YEARS INVOLVED WITH THE SPECIALTY AUTO AFTERMARKET:** 14
- **COMPANY/BRAND PARTNERS:**
  - WARN INDUSTRIES
  - BFGOODRICH
  - HP TUNERS
  - SEYMOUR PAINT
  - KC HILITES
  - TOM WOODS CUSTOM DRIVE SHAFTS
  - ONX OFF-ROAD
  - TORQUE WHEELS
  - AXEL OFF ROAD
  - BILSTEIN

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"I believe in DIY, and I try to inspire other people—especially women—to take projects into their own hands, making the industry more accessible to all," she says.

At Flex, Rocks & Rollovers, Marvin Stammel and his crew aren't just showing off builds—they're putting parts to the test in extreme conditions, which gives brands honest feedback and shows consumers exactly what to expect.

"High-profile users have brought new levels of visibility, transparency and engagement to the automotive aftermarket. Enthusiasts can see real people testing gear on real trails in real time," he says. "We've helped shift the industry toward a more experience-driven model, where storytelling and authenticity matter as much as product specs."

The relationships also help enthusiasts feel more comfortable with the manufacturers they choose, says Julie Heyer, aka Aqua Jeepgirl.

"When I'm choosing upgrades for my Jeep, I want to see what they are like in action. Seeing them used—and even a bit beaten up to show their durability—by someone I follow and trust on social media makes the product more desirable," she explains. "Being able to reach out and ask questions or even see them in person at an event and get honest feedback is a big selling feature. Integrity and experience matter. Influencer marketing can make customers feel closer to a brand and make the company more approachable."



It's important that influencers, like Spartacus the JT, genuinely use and trust the products they promote, because the off-road community can spot inauthenticity a mile away. (Photo courtesy RANDYS Worldwide/Mark Roy)

Real-world examples particularly resonate with enthusiasts, says Mark Roy/Spartacus the JT, because viewers often envision themselves doing what the influencer is showing.

"Off-roading is a demanding lifestyle where gear gets tested in the toughest conditions—mud, rocks, steep climbs and long trails. We don't just promote products—we put them through real-world challenges, provide detailed feedback and create content that educates and inspires the community," he explains. "That level of involvement takes time, effort and genuine passion."

The goal is for influencers to be 100% relatable to their audiences, says Dominic Knight of AdventuresByKnight who, like many social media personalities, started as an avid enthusiast and then grew his following.

"My driving force behind partnering with different brands initially was to help get discounts on upgrade parts for my Jeep," he reveals, "but after a short while of learning about different companies, products and partnerships, it has become more of a passion to align myself with automotive brands



Long-term collaborations are the key to successful partnerships between aftermarket brands and the influencers, like Natasha Adams, who bring them to life. (Photo courtesy KC HiLiTES/ Natasha Adams)



At Flex, Rocks & Rollovers, Marvin Stammel and his crew look to bring a new level of visibility, transparency and engagement to the aftermarket. (Photo courtesy Warn Industries/Flex, Rocks & Rollovers)



Influencers are putting aftermarket parts to the test in extreme conditions, giving brands honest feedback and showing consumers exactly what to expect. (Photo courtesy Warn Industries/Flex, Rocks & Rollovers)

that I know and trust—not just for my vehicles, but to recommend these same products to family and friends, so they get the same great experience as I'm having. It's pretty awesome to be one of the lucky people tied to such cool partner brands and to attend fun events to showcase their products on the trails and highways."

DEFINITE BENEFITS

Many aftermarket influencers embrace the *#automotivelifestyle*—and everything that hashtag now entails—but supplier partnerships only work if both sides see real benefits. Long-term collaborations are one key, says Adams, who works with companies to provide how-to/installation videos, sales promotions, niche audience connections, new product releases, community representation and product testing.

"Benefits come from showcasing to followers that I not only install or use products for a single video, but I continue to use certain brands' products because I stand by the brands that stand by me," she says. "This ensures the content feels like a trusted recommendation and not a forced ad."

As such, she seeks connections with companies she can stand behind.

"I collaborate with brands I would use whether I was partnered with them or not, sharing the dependability and strength of their products."

Even after the parts are proved, notes Stammel, the partnerships can continue.

"I dig deeper—not only providing honest product feedback from the field but also consulting with our partners on how to turn that content into actual dollars," he says. "Whether it's optimizing messaging, identifying new market opportunities or strengthening their positioning, we're always thinking about how to move the needle for the brand."

Flex, Rocks & Rollovers looks to deliver organic product integrations in its off-road adventure content along with endorsements, social media marketing, consulting, in-person appearances at events and product testing, says Stammel. Networking is another important benefit that's often overlooked.

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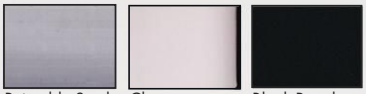


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Influencer marketing from personalities like Aqua Jeepgirl helps customers feel closer to brands and makes the companies more approachable. (Photo courtesy RANDYS Worldwide/Julie Heyer)

"Over the years, we've facilitated countless brand partnerships and collaborations between companies in our network," he reports. "When we work with a brand, they're not just getting content—they're getting a strategic partner, a connector and someone actively invested in their success. That kind of value is hard to quantify, but it makes a massive difference."

Ambassador collaborations also help traditional aftermarket companies think outside the box, says Heyer, who offers brand representation, product testing and demonstrations, installation videos, trail guide services, social media marketing/content creation, in-person appearances and sponsor run hosting.

"Influencers bring increased creativity and fresh ideas," she says. "For me, it's all about finding partners that share the same commitment to excellence in the automotive world. Off-roading is not just a hobby but a lifestyle, and I collaborate with brands that support and enhance that journey—brands that align with my values and passion for the industry."

Well-known ambassadors help open doors for brands into the connected 4x4 world, says Roy, who provides social media content, how-to videos and tutorials, detailed product testing feedback, endorsements and in-person appearances to his partners.

"Influencers serve as trusted voices inside tightknit communities. In the rock crawling world, word of mouth is everything. If a respected driver or builder recommends a product after using it hard on the trail, it carries far more weight than a traditional ad," he says. "Another unexpected benefit is the kind of detailed feedback brands receive. Influencers who are hands-on builders and wheelers can spot weaknesses, suggest improvements and highlight strengths that engineers or marketing teams might overlook, which helps refine products and build better gear."

Reliable, quality content is the starting point for anyone looking to become a recognized brand ambassador, says Knight, who showcases products through social media marketing, creates how-to videos, and tests product durability and gives feedback for his partners.

"You need to post content you enjoy posting in a way that's true to you because once you start posting consistently that's what your audience and companies will know you for," he notes. "You'll also want to genuinely like the company you're trying to connect with and have faith and confidence in the quality of the products you're looking to represent."

The feedback component is especially valuable to companies hoping to refine their products and product mix to meet the ever-changing demands of today's enthusiasts.

"I receive countless messages from followers who are so tuned in to what I'm doing with my rigs and are eagerly waiting for a build update or a report after a shakedown run," says Kris, whose content mix includes endorsements, social media marketing, in-person appearances and long-form YouTube videos. "They always want to know how and where to get the parts that help improve the performance of my rig."

I SEE YOU

Showcasing aftermarket components performing as they were designed in real-world scenarios creates authentic connections between audiences, influencers and the brands they represent.

"It's important that I genuinely use and trust the products I promote—whether it's suspension components, axles, recovery gear or tires—because the off-road community can spot inauthenticity a mile away," says Roy. "When both sides are aligned—me as an influencer focused on real-world trail use and the company providing high-quality, reliable gear—we create a partnership that feels natural and honest to the audience. That builds trust, which leads to stronger brand loyalty and long-term growth."

He points to the support he received from Dynatrac and Yukon Gear & Axle on his recent build of a Jeep Gladiator into an extremely capable off-road and rock crawling machine, complete with a 392 Hemi engine.

"With that kind of power, I needed a drivetrain that could handle serious abuse on technical trails," he notes. "It wasn't about promoting random parts—it was about sharing gear that I've trusted for decades and still rely on today."

Adams says real-life product use expands her reach to a wider crowd of engaged followers.

"In my case, I have vehicles from 1967-2019 and I showcase brands on all different years, makes and models. Most followers like relatable stories, videos and photos—not full production ads."

The companies she works with reap the benefits from the trust that's built. Adams' partnership with Carparts.com over the last three years, for instance, has focused on product testing and validation.

"Three collab reels (at least) between my brand and theirs have gone viral, with over 1.5 million views each," she reports.

Knight started his off-road journey with a stock Jeep that, with the help of Yukon Gear & Axle, he's built into an impressive crawler, creating videos and posts to document every step along the way. In exchange for discounted parts, he shares his enthusiasm for the brand with his audience, and his feedback on products with the brand.

"Partnering with an influencer provides a company an extra ear into what people need or want in the automotive market, or maybe something that's missing that a company can fill with a certain product—even a simple upgrade to a product that makes it even better for consumers," he says.

When it comes to carving out a niche in the highly competitive automotive aftermarket, telling a brand's story is what attracts and keeps viewers, says Stammel.

"The key is alignment—in values, goals and audience. A successful partnership isn't just about product placement; it's about building a relationship where both sides bring something meaningful to the table," he says, using his partnership with Warn Industries as an example.

"From the start, we connected over a shared mission to not only showcase quality recovery gear but to reshape how the off-road community views winching. There's a lingering perception that if you have to winch, you've somehow failed. But we've made it our mission to flip that narrative and make winching cool," he explains. "In our video series like 'Hell and Back Adventure' and '24 Hell and Back,' we highlight winching as an essential, strategic tool that allows us to push farther into terrain most people wouldn't dare tackle. We celebrate those moments because they represent progress, not defeat. Through those productions, we've helped normalize—and even glamorize—winching as a badge of honor, showing how it plays a critical role in serious off-road exploration."

Heyer began a successful partnership with Dynatrac four years ago, using the company's ProRock 44/ProFloat XD60 axles on her aqua-colored Jeep.

"We worked together for two years—representing at events and on social media—until I needed to upgrade to larger axles. We worked together on a second set of their axles (ProRock 60/80), and I've been proud to run those for two years now," she says.

Meanwhile, Kris notes that the best pairings come when companies and influencers trust one another.

"When both parties truly embrace each other's vision, purpose, values and passion, it creates the perfect foundation for a lasting partnership that moves toward growth and success for everyone."

IT TAKES TIME

If there's one thing Natasha Adams wishes collaborators knew about influencer relationships it's that success takes time and behind-the-scenes work.

"Results are not always instant," she says. "I prefer long-term brand partnerships that showcase brand awareness rather than quick sales."

There's also more to them than just social media posts, says Stammel of Flex, Rocks & Rollovers.

"In our case, (social media impressions) are just the tip of the iceberg. We're helping brands with content strategy, product feedback, field research and even connecting them with other businesses," he explains. "When done right, an influencer partnership can become an extension of a company's marketing and R&D efforts—not just a megaphone."

To the uninitiated, influencer marketing may seem like nothing more "than posting pretty pictures or simple product plugs," says Roy/Spartacus the JT. "In reality, successful partnerships are built on authentic, hands-on experience and trust. We act as a bridge between companies and the off-road community—helping brands improve their products and making sure customers get gear that actually performs."

Heyer/Aqua Jeepgirl notes that successful parings take time to develop.

"The biggest misconception is that partnerships are about quick sales boosts or gimmicks, but I believe they're more about long-term relationships and audience connection," she says. "Both sides need to agree on the campaign's purpose, brand awareness, engagement and storytelling."

There's no denying influencers have made a profound impact on the specialty automotive aftermarket, even if the goal is the same as it's always been—to help enthusiasts find the parts they need to live out their automotive high-performance and extreme adventure dreams.

"People can now watch trusted builders and influencers install, test and tune, and review products and parts in real time," says Kris/Theee.Kris. "It's created a more authentic space where people can truly relate to other enthusiasts while giving the brands a stronger connection to their specific audience, which then helps others make the best choices for their builds." ***TS***



AdventuresByKnight notes that producing reliable, quality content is the starting point for anyone looking to become a recognized brand ambassador. (Photo courtesy RANDYS Worldwide/Dominic Knight)

Restyling
AFTERMARKET ACCESSORIES

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Shops should focus on product quality and features instead of selling just on price. (Photos courtesy RockJock 4x4 by John Currie)

A STRONG ATTACHMENT

Solid, secure connections are at the heart of the towing aftermarket. BY JEF WHITE

Connecting with customers is always important—and even more so when it comes to selling and installing aftermarket towing systems and components.

The key to unlocking so many of the adventures enthusiasts crave, towing systems often require a professional touch to adequately and safely perform as expected. Meanwhile, evolving vehicle trends, including the growth of off-road RVs and adventure trucks, are creating demand for specialized towing products.

Suppliers are available to help keep track of it all, offering observations on the industry trends, hot products and sales strategies shops will need to create a strong attachment with their towing clients.

WHAT IT TAKES

Educated towing customers are demanding more from the products they use and the companies and suppliers they work with.

"As RVs and trailers get larger and more feature-rich, consumers are demanding towing solutions that make the experience smoother and safer," says Kristi Feeney, marketing director, automotive division, for CURT. "Shops that can confidently recommend premium towing upgrades like cushioned pin boxes or add-on safety products like electronic sway control are better positioned to meet those expectations and grow their business."

Many towing customers prefer in-person shopping and professional interactions, says Russell Brzezinski, senior director – product development (towing) for REESE, who notes that a "growing dependence and sourcing of product through e-commerce outlets" is creating a "loss of tribal knowledge share from face-to-face interactions with local, reputable service outlets," to the detriment of the towing aftermarket.



Retailers looking to enter the towing aftermarket will want to take a close look at two important indicators, says Alex Walker, director of sales for Blue Ox. They are economic factors and online sales.

"We work diligently to hold UMRP prices online so that shops have an equal playing field to online sellers," he notes. "We want our products to be sold and installed by our partners rather than purchased online."

Aran Kay, sales and marketing manager for Pacbrake, has seen the industry recently affected by "margin compression from channel shifts and cost volatility."



We have retooled our brand with a new logo and a renewed focus on serving the real American tradesmen that rely on our boxes. We're still the same tough, functional UWS you've come to depend on.

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Serious towing clients are willing to pay for the quality components needed to stay safe and secure. (Photos courtesy Blue Ox)

He notes that "price-transparent e-commerce and tariff/supply swings are pinching labor and parts margins. Consumers research online and expect speed plus value; meanwhile, accessory demand is healthy but competitive, and tariffs or logistics hiccups can whipsaw costs. Shops need tighter sourcing and premium, low-return product lines to protect gross profit percentage."

General economic and manufacturing trends can affect the towing market, notes Donna Schmucker, marketing director for GEN-Y Hitch, from supply chain disruptions and material costs and availability to higher interest rates. Challenges are offset, however, by increased interest in towing-based activities.

"Additionally, evolving vehicle trends, including the growth of off-road RVs and adventure trucks, are creating demand for specialized towing products," she notes.

Meanwhile, access to a variety of critical components is often necessary to create unique systems that serve individual demands.

"The most impactful factor affecting the towing aftermarket for shops is the

TOWING PRODUCTS

■ **HOT PRODUCT:**
BRK2022 Patriot Braking System
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Fully electric, lightweight braking system that is positioned to reflect normal force used to brake the vehicle; can be controlled from the coach.

Blue Ox
Alex Walker
Director of Sales

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Locking Products
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Available products include coupler locks, locking pins, latch locks and pintle locks; offer enhanced security to protect valuable investments such as hitches, trailers, and other accessories; several key codes available and locks can be keyed alike for convenience.

Bulletproof Hitches
Deron Adams
General Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCT:**
CURT Helux Gooseneck Pin Box
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
A premium upgrade for fifth-wheel-to-gooseneck conversions; delivers a smoother, more confident towing experience for heavy-duty haulers; includes an integrated coil and shock cushioning system that delivers 30% less chucking and jarring.

CURT
Kristi Feeney
Marketing Director, Automotive Division

■ **HOT PRODUCT:**
MEGA-DUTY Drop Hitch
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Flagship model designed as a "one-hitch-for-all" solution; allows users to tow a wide variety of loads without needing multiple hitches; compatible with 2- and 2-5/16-inch balls; includes a pintle lock for lunette ring trailers; fully reversible installation.

GEN-Y Hitch
Donna Schmucker
Marketing Director

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
ALPHA Air Suspension Kits
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Built tough with one-piece, 1-inch-thick aluminum end caps with 20 support wires, plus heavy-duty double- or single-convoluted springs for load support from 1,800 to 7,500 pounds; ALPHA PRO S kit adds stainless braided air lines, fittings and more.

Pacbrake
Aran Kay
Sales & Marketing Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCT:**
REESE Goose Box 22.5K
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
A 22.5K replacement pin box that allows users to tow an RV or toy hauler with just a gooseball—no need for a heavy, cumbersome fifth wheel.

REESE
Russell Brzezinski
Senior Director – Product Development (Towing)

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Tow Bar Mounting Kits
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Available for Jeep applications; designed as the highest ground clearance tow bar mounting solution available to maintain maximum approach angle for Jeeps going off-road after being towed to an application.

RockJock 4x4 by John Currie
Brian Shephard
Marketing Director

■ **HOT PRODUCT:**
Wireless Air Bag Controller Kit with Compressor
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Designed to complement all Rough Country air bag kits, the system allows for effortless adjustment and fine-tuning on the go; DOT-approved air lines; 9% duty cycle compressor; Bluetooth connectivity for seamless control via mobile device.

Rough Country
Tim Watts
VP Sales

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Rebel SumoSprings
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Go-to towing solutions that act as direct replacements for air bags while offering a simpler, maintenance-free design; install directly into the factory air bag brackets, with no compressors, air lines or adjustments; micro-cellular polyurethane material.

SuperSprings International
Alex Hodschayan
Director of Marketing

capability to offer a diverse range of products that cater to every customer's specific needs," says Deron Adams, general manager for Bulletproof Hitches.

Towing clients often prefer simple, straightforward solutions, says Alex Hodschayan, director of marketing for Super-Springs International.

"Customers are asking for less complexity. Rising installation and maintenance costs, combined with frustration from leaking or failing systems, have shifted demand toward solutions that can be installed once and trusted for the long haul. That expectation for reliability is shaping what shops choose to recommend," he says.



Quality systems naturally lead to add-on sales opportunities for installation shops. (Photos courtesy Pacbrake)

The opportunities for shops are there, as off-road and recreational interest shows no signs of slowing.

"The continued popularity of off-the-grid and outdoor adventure lifestyles remains a major driver for the towing aftermarket, even after the COVID surge has faded," says Tim Watts, vice president of sales for Rough Country. "While many other product categories have seen contraction, the towing segment stays strong thanks to outdoor and destination-focused enthusiasts. We

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Access to a variety of critical aftermarket components is often necessary to create unique towing systems that serve individual demands. (Photos courtesy Bulletproof Hitches)

frequently attend overlanding and similar events, and the consistent turnout and enthusiasm reinforce this ongoing trend."

DO THE JOB RIGHT

A healthy respect for tow vehicles and the importance of quality components to do the job correctly will serve professionals well as they interact with customers.

"A lot of shops are not up on the differences in tow bars and why some are so cheap while others are more expensive. It seems that a lot of people on both sides of the shop counter are not fully aware of how heavy these vehicles are and how heavy they get when they are built up, and that a proper tow bar for the vehicle weight must be purchased," says Brian Shephard, marketing director for RockJock 4x4 by John Currie.

Uninformed customers often believe that all hitches and towing products are the same, "which is just not true and something suppliers are looking at to further differentiate themselves from others," says Brzezinski.

From heavy-duty and commercial vehicles to lighter-duty models used for camping, boating or overlanding, a large portion of the trucks and SUVs on the road today would benefit greatly from an enhanced towing system, says Watts.

"Many shops also underestimate how easy modern systems are to install and integrate, particularly with wireless and plug-and-play solutions," he adds. "Educating installers and customers about these advancements can help overcome outdated perceptions."

Dependable parts that work as advertised go a long way toward improving safety and customer satisfaction, says Feeney.

"(Product) design and engineering make a huge difference in ride comfort, control and long-term durability," she explains. "Products like our Helux gooseneck pin box are purpose-built to address specific towing pain points and help customers understand that value can make all the difference in a sale."

As is the case in many markets, not all offerings are created equally, says Schmucker.

"Many assume any brand of hitch, ball mount or pin performs the same, ignoring the differences in engineering, materials, quality and testing," she says. "We offer



As RVs and trailers get larger and more feature-rich, consumers are demanding solutions that make the towing experience smoother and safer. (Photo courtesy CURT)

facility tours to customers to see firsthand how our products are created and designed with the customer in mind."

Serious towing clients are willing to pay for the quality components needed to stay safe and secure, says Walker.

"Customers want the best value-added products that are long-lasting and backed by the manufacturer. We design our products to be able to be efficiently installed and easy for the customer to use, and we stand behind them."

Kays says dealers may have to fight the misconception that add-on air springs don't raise a truck's GVWR (gross vehicle weight rating).

"What air springs do is help you tow and haul safer by keeping the truck level, restoring proper headlight aim and steering geometry, and reducing squat and sway," he explains. "That control can feel more 'comfortable,' but it's not a softer, cushier ride—under load you'll typically run more air pressure, which feels firmer, so the truck stays stable and planted."

Having sales and installation teams that understand how towing systems operate helps shops avoid the issue of "a lack of comprehensive product knowledge that often hinders their ability to accurately determine weight ratings and measurements, which are crucial for fitting consumers with the appropriate products," says Adams.



The market is enjoying increased interest in towing-based activities. (Photo courtesy GEN-Y Hitch)

A good place to start, suggests Hodschayan, is with how the system integrates into the tow vehicle's suspension setup.

"A frequent misconception is that suspension enhancements replace the factory suspension. In reality, these products are designed to work alongside it—absorbing and distributing loads more effectively," he notes. "Once that distinction is clear, customers better understand the role these upgrades play in their safety and comfort."

SALES START HERE

Shops that familiarize themselves with the towing product brands they carry will have the ability to sell on quality and features instead of simply on price, says Shephard





Towing clients often appreciate simple, straightforward solutions. (Photo courtesy SuperSprings International)

SEMA ACQUIRES OFF-ROAD BUSINESS ASSOCIATION

The Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) recently acquired the Off-Road Business Association (ORBA), a 501(c)(6) organization dedicated to representing businesses and professionals in the off-road and powersports industries.

Off-road products and services are the largest and fastest-growing segment of the automotive aftermarket, SEMA officials report in a press release, noting the acquisition enhances the association's ability to support the advocacy and business needs of the off-road and powersports communities, and the innovators who sell their products to millions of enthusiasts nationwide.

"Today is a great day for off-road and powersports enthusiasts and the businesses who cater to them because it further unifies efforts to advocate in Washington, D.C., and statehouses nationwide on their behalf," says Mike Spagnola, SEMA president and CEO. "By acquiring ORBA, SEMA further unifies our shared efforts to preserve motorized access to our nation's open spaces and secure policies that strike a tenable balance between land use and conservation."

Fred Wiley, ORBA CEO, notes the organization originally formed to "support the off-road industry through business acumen and advocacy."

Joining forces with SEMA ensures the 4x4 industry will "remain at the table on the important issues affecting motorized access to public lands and protecting the right to modify and race," he says.

With the agreement, Wiley will serve as a senior strategic adviser to SEMA on off-road and powersports issues.



The Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) has acquired the Off-Road Business Association (ORBA) as part of its efforts to protect and advance the interests of the 4x4 market. (Photo courtesy Jeep/Stellantis)

from RockJock 4x4 by John Currie.

"Clients with high-ticket vehicles need to be made aware of the differences in why there is a price range of tow bars and towing attachment kits," he explains. "'Yes, there are $160 tow bars—and you, sir, have a $160,000, 6,200-pound Jeep Gladiator. This is not a good way to go.' They need to educate themselves on the market so that they can efficiently recommend proper products to their audience."

Explaining to customers how components work together to create safe, secure towing systems pays off, says Walker from Blue Ox—even if the sales come later.

"Educate consumers on all options available for their vehicles," he advises. "They may not purchase them today, but they know where they can go the next time they want to add towing products. This includes not only the major steel parts, but accessories that can enhance their towing experience."

Well-schooled salespeople and installers can make all the difference, says Watts from Rough Country.

"Invest in education, both for your staff and your customers," he recommends. "Understanding the market landscape, knowing what products are available and recognizing how each option fits different vehicle types or performance goals are key. When shops can confidently guide customers toward the right setup, it builds trust and drives more sales."

CURT's Feeney recommends shops "lead with the benefits, not just the specs. When customers understand how a product can reduce stress, improve ride quality and pro-





The towing segment remains strong, thanks to destination-focused enthusiasts demanding quality products for their next adventure. (Photos courtesy Rough Country)

tect their investment, price becomes less of a barrier. Show real-world applications, use manufacturer-provided training and display materials, and position your shop as a go-to towing expert—not just an installer."

Brzezinski from REESE recommends companies focus on the features that set products apart, "be it ease of use, increased capacity at the same price point, additional capabilities such as weight carry and distribution, and also warranty/testing standards adherence."

Shops looking to boost towing product sales can gain a significant edge by leveraging social proof, promoting high-quality products and engaging online, says GEN-Y's Schmucker.

"Sharing photos, videos and customer testimonials of successful installations helps build trust and demonstrates real-world performance, showing potential buyers that your products deliver on their promises," she reports. "Focusing on premium, American-made products not only highlights the value of long-lasting solutions but also positions your shop as a go-to source for reliable towing solutions."

Hodschayan from SuperSprings recommends positioning upgrades as long-term solutions, not quick fixes.

"When shops explain how products like Rebel SumoSprings reduce maintenance headaches and deliver consistent results, customers see the value more clearly," he says. "Framing the conversation around performance, durability and peace of mind helps move the focus away from cost and toward investment."

Quality systems naturally lead to add-on sales opportunities for installation shops, says Pacbrake's Kay.

"Carry products that have strong attach (upsell) rates to other products and into other accessory categories," he says. "For example, tow-haul users will often begin with air springs. Wireless air controls with onboard air are great upsells to this product for level-your-load-anywhere convenience. And, once they have onboard air, you can now upsell air horns, exhaust brakes and perhaps tire deflators for off-roading. After all, you can just refill your tires when done with onboard air. Now that the customer is off-roading, you have a whole new category of accessories to sell them."

Shops can lean on their suppliers for assistance, says Adams, who notes that Bulletproof Hitches offers retailers a five-hitch showroom display.

"These displays provide consumers with a tangible opportunity to experience the quality craftsmanship of our products firsthand," he says. "Furthermore, it allows them to physically assess how a hitch might look and fit on their vehicle, which can significantly influence their purchasing decision." ***TS***



Focus on the features that set quality towing products apart. (Photos courtesy REESE)



Dream Big

What they lack in size, today's crossovers more than make up for in ambition.

BY JEF WHITE



CUVs are fuel-efficient daily drivers that are capable enough for weekend adventures. (Photo courtesy Yakima Products)

Small in stature but mighty in ambition, today's crossovers are go-anywhere machines with the same attitude as their larger truck and SUV counterparts.

Oftentimes used as both daily drivers and weekend adventurers, CUVs are accessory market darlings, with owners looking to maximize style, performance and cargo space. Personalization is important, with drivers willing to invest in versatile premium gear to match their lifestyle.

If your shop's ready to consider the profit potential CUVs have to offer, product suppliers are ready to help with observations on market trends, sales techniques and hot new products for these smaller vehicles that dream big.

READY FOR ADVENTURE

CUV accessorization is popular because crossovers have proved their versatility and staying power, says Todd Scott, senior category manager – top of car, truck and vehicle fitment for Yakima Products.

"For one-car households, the CUV offers a fuel-efficient daily driver that is capable for adventures on the weekend," he notes.

The vehicles are almost universally accepted and appreciated, says Sara Ford, marketing manager for Coast to Coast International.

"CUVs appeal to a huge audience—from professionals to families to weekend adventurers—which keeps demand for customization strong," she says. "The wide range of accessory options allows each driver to personalize their vehicle to match their lifestyle."

Their go-anywhere attitude also make them an aftermarket darling, offering plenty of personalization potential.

"CUVs strike the balance between daily use and weekend adventure," says Craig Metcalf, automotive manager for Küat. "Customers want gear-hauling capability and versatility without driving a full-size truck or SUV. That makes CUVs one of the most consistent and profitable vehicle categories for accessories."

BIG IDEAS FOR SMALL PACKAGES

Sometimes, education regarding crossover

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Owners of premium crossovers can be a desirable customer demographic. (Photo courtesy Küat)

KIA BIDS FAREWELL TO THE SOUL

From humble beginnings as a boxy concept vehicle in Kia's U.S. design studio and continuing through 16 years of passion, the fun and funky Kia Soul urban runabout has always stood out from the crowd. Now, after selling more than 1.5 million units in America, Kia is ending production of the Soul CUV in 2025.

"The Soul was one of the cornerstones in Kia gaining a foothold in the United States and this one-of-a-kind vehicle—and the marketing supporting it—helped Kia move to where it resides today," says Eric Watson, vice president, sales, Kia America. "Kia is steadily progressing toward its third consecutive annual sales record and all-time high market share, and that is possible thanks to the early success carved out by the Soul. We are proud of the legacy Soul will leave behind as it exits our lineup, but equally excited for the future of Kia's expansive and award-winning utility vehicle lineup."

Originally inspired by the idea of a "boar wearing a backpack," the Soul enjoyed cutting-edge marketing and many special concept designs through the years, including the 2009 Soul'ster, a pickup/utility variant, and the 2012 Track'ster with its turbocharged, 250-hp engine, two-doors and AWD system, which paved the way for the introduction of the second-generation Soul in 2014.

Track gave way to trail at the Chicago Auto Show in 2015, with the debut of the Trail'ster concept. A more rugged interpretation of the Soul, it featured an e-AWD system and its signature unique design cues.

Throughout its life, the Soul was often at the core of Kia's SEMA Show displays as well, with customized creations ranging from a mobile DJ booth and rolling music memorabilia museum to an all-electric reimagining of a classic ice cream truck, showing the Soul's undeniable customization potential.

After selling more than 1.5 million units in America, Kia is ending production of the Soul CUV in 2025. (Photo courtesy Kia)



accessorization is all that's needed to get the ball rolling.

"A common misconception shops face when working with CUV customers is, 'There are no off-road or adventure vehicle products made for my car," says Scott.

It's important to remember that crossover owners have as much pride in their cars as any other enthusiast market, Ford notes.

"A lot of shops assume CUV owners aren't interested in customizing their rides, since they're not driving big trucks or off-road rigs," she says. "CUV drivers might not be after massive lift kits or oversized tires, but they love adding upgrades that boost functionality, protection and style to fit their everyday lifestyle."

Owners of premium crossovers can be a desirable customer demographic, says Metcalf.

"They often over-invest in premium gear that lets them maximize limited space," he reveals. "They value sleek design, functionality and solutions that help them adventure without compromise."

SALES COME IN ALL SIZES

When it comes to CUV accessorization, Ford from Coast to Coast advises shops start with the people inside.



CUVs are accessory market darlings, with owners looking to maximize style, performance and utility. (Photo by Jef White)

EBAY REPORTS INCREASED INTEREST IN KEI TRUCKS



eBay recently reported a global wave of interest in kei trucks—the tiny, versatile vehicles plucked straight from the streets of Japan.
(Photo by Jef White)

Data analysts at eBay recently reported a global wave of interest in kei trucks—the tiny, versatile vehicles plucked straight from the streets of Japan.

"From enthusiasts and collectors to practical users, more drivers are embracing these iconic trucks for work and play," eBay representatives note in a press release.

Over the last two years, kei trucks exploded in popularity, and an increase in imports exposed more Americans to the quirky, affordable and efficient vehicles. Between 2023-25 on eBay:

- Kei truck sales increased by nearly 90%
- Sales of popular Subaru Sambars and Honda Actys increased by nearly 50%
- Sales of Daihatsu Hijets increased by more than 25%

The interest shows no sign of slowing. In August 2025, kei trucks were searched globally more than 340 times per day on eBay, with Suzuki Carrys searched over 1,000 times per day.



Customization packages are popular with drivers looking for versatility and style.
(Photo courtesy Coast to Coast Intentional)

"Ask about their hobbies, lifestyle and what they value most—style, function or price," she advises. "When you know that balance, it's easier to recommend the right mix of products, making your suggestions feel more personal and increasing the chances of both a sale and an installation."

Knowledge and inventory are a powerful combination, says Yakima's Scott.

"Ensure your staff is educated on all the upgrades and accessories now available for these types of cars," he suggests. "Stock upgrades and aftermarket accessories for the highest application rate CUVs including Subaru Crosstrek and Forester, Toyota RAV4, Honda CR-V and Kia Sportage models."

When it comes to the accessories themselves, Metcalf from Küat suggests a package approach that captures the vehicles' adventurous spirit.

"Sell the full system, not just the rack," he advises. "Our DEK Rooftop Platform is a perfect entry point, but customers are more likely to buy when they see bundled setups—add-ons like bike racks, ski carriers or rooftop storage. Demo units and displays drive attachment sales, and installation bundles help shops capture additional margin." **TS**

CUV PRODUCTS

HOT PRODUCTS:
CUV Restyling Packages
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Components include grille overlays, Impostor wheel skins, door handles and mirror covers; easy, affordable way to instantly elevate a vehicle's appearance or refresh its color styling; available for popular vehicles in a variety of premium finishes.
Coast to Coast International
Sara Ford
Marketing Manager

HOT PRODUCT:
DEK Rooftop Platform
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Purpose-built for crossovers; adds serious cargo versatility without sacrificing style or daily drivability; light bar accessory available featuring five Diode Dynamics C2 2.0 Pro LEDs; 100% aluminum and steel construction; universal channel mounts; low profile.
Küat
Craig Metcalf
Automotive Manager

HOT PRODUCT:
MOD In-Vehicle Drawer System
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Modular system that starts with HomeBase and is configurable, with a selection of additional drawers, totes, gear crates or a fridge slide; installs without modifications to the vehicle to create a high-quality storage system to keep items organized.
Yakima Products
Todd Scott
Sr. Category Manager – Top of Car, Truck & Vehicle Fitment

Rear Suspension Enhancement Kit for Lifted Jeeps

SuperSprings International, Carpinteria, California, offers a Rear Enhancement Suspension Kit for Jeeps with 3 or more inches of lift. SSR-408-40/47/54 rear kits are designed specifically for Jeep JK, JL and JT models. They are offered in three densities to enhance vehicle stability and control on highways and trails.





Tundra Suspension Systems

ICON Vehicle Dynamics, Riverside, California, presents its CDXS Compression Damping Dual Speed shocks, coil-overs and complete suspension system for 2022-up Toyota Tundra models. With independent compression damping adjustability for both high- and low-speed shock velocity, the components deliver finer adjustment increments to allow drivers to fine-tune their vehicle's performance, optimizing both normal driving conditions and more aggressive scenarios.



Ranger Lift System

Eibach, Corona, California, offers its PRO-TRUCK-LIFT Stage 2R Coilover Lift System for 2024-25 Ford Ranger 4WD applications. Made to handle the toughest terrain, the system combines the adjustability of the company's PRO-TRUCK Coilover 2.0 up front with the consistent performance of its PRO-TRUCK Reservoir damper in back. The height-adjustable front coil-over and external reservoir rear shocks combine to deliver increased off-road performance, with anodized 6061-T6 billet aluminum coil-over mounts and more.

Side Lights

KC HiLiTES, Flagstaff, Arizona, presents the KC Profile 10-Inch SideCast (P10SC) Flush Mount Light Kit that includes four lights engineered with BiasBeam optics for precision side lighting. Each light casts a 60-degree down-facing beam for use in off-road, overlanding and rock crawling adventures. The kit includes four low-profile lights designed to integrate into the company's Platform One roof rack's side rails. Each P10SC also features DualColor output, allowing users to switch between white and amber light.





Tonneau Cover

Bestop, Broomfield, Colorado, presents the Supertop For Truck 2 Tonneau Cover that uses the rails of the company's Supertop for Truck 2 soft top. Designed as an economical, versatile cover, the system is fully integrated to make an easy transition from a Supertop For Truck 2 to a low-profile tonneau cover. Constructed of heavy-duty tonneau fabric with the company's EZ-Roll and bow system, it is suitable for use on Jeep Gladiators and similar off-road vehicles, quickly transforming between covered and open bed setups. ***TS***

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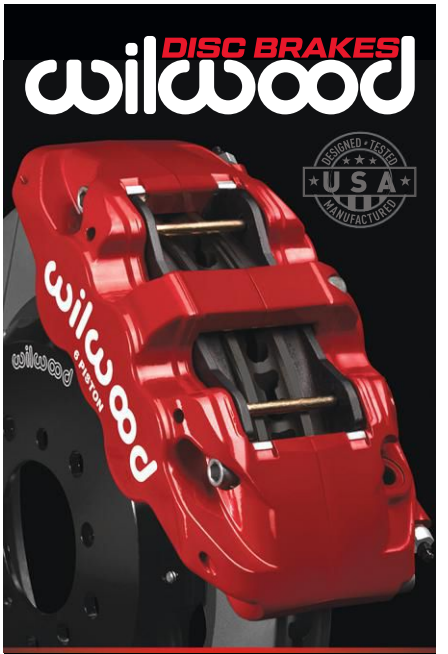


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Grand National Show Crowns World's Most Beautiful Truck





Larry Jacinto's 1941 Willys built by Veazie Bros. Fabrication was crowned the World's Most Beautiful Truck at the third annual Grand National Truck Show. (Photo courtesy GNTS)

From the producers of the long-standing Grand National Roadster Show, the third annual O'Reilly Auto Parts Grand National Truck Show dubbed a sparkling blue 1941 Willys pickup the World's Most Beautiful Truck.

Presented by Classic Truck Performance magazine, the show hosted more than 400 trucks, vans and SUVs at the Fairplex in Pomona (California) in September. Awards were presented in more than 65 classes.

The World's Most Beautiful Truck Award, sponsored by ARP Fasteners, was presented to Larry Jacinto's 1941 Willys built by Veazie Bros. Fabrication. Originally owned by family friend, Fred Peake, Jacinto purchased the truck more than four decades later.

Legendary builder Bob Bauder started the build and played a significant role in establishing the truck's stance and maintaining its original shape. Veazie Bros. eventually took over the truck after Bauder's passing in 2017.

The immaculately finished engine compartment houses a blown and injected LS3 engine topped with a polished 6-71 Littlefield blower. The elegantly altered body, which features a fully custom '46 Chevy truck bed and tailgate, is finished in deep blue by Mick's Paint. The Ron Mangus interior boasts a modified original dash, including Classic Instruments OE-style gauges, and leather bench seat.

Jacinto beat out a field of nine other custom trucks, which included five Chevy C10s ranging from 1967-85, three Ford F-100s and a 1976 Blazer, to claim the $12,500 prize and custom trophy.

"This weekend is special because it brings together amazing trucks, SUVs and vans of all kinds under one roof," says John Buck, owner of Rod Shows and producer of the Grand National Truck Show. "From one-off customs to patinas, mini-trucks and more, there isn't another show where you can see such a variety of trucks, and we're so thankful to all of the owners who joined us this year."







A full field of 10 customs battled for the title of World's Most Beautiful Truck. (Photos courtesy GNTS)

The weekend also featured two new awards—the Chip Foose Design Achievement Award, which went to Bob Matranga's blue 1968 Chevy C10, and the Courtney Hallowell Memorial Award, which went to Jesse Corrales's 1952 Chevy 3100.

Meanwhile, Ken Tilton's 1970 Chevy C10 was awarded the Steve Stillwell Memorial Award, and the Tom McWeeney Memorial Pinstriping Award was presented to James Griffin's 1998 GMC Sonoma. Del Uschenko, the founder of Delmo Speed and Delmo 4x4, received the Truck Trend Setter Award to recognize his contributions to the custom truck hobby.

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