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Today's off-road racks offer the style, versatility and carrying capacity that overlanders crave. Efficient designs and custom fits appeal to a wide variety of drivers looking to enhance their favorite trail vehicle. *See article on page 12.* (Main photo courtesy Yakima Products; inset photo courtesy ICON 4x4)

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Jef White
Editor in Chief
theshopmag.com

US Vehicle Brand Loyalty Climbs Slightly to 5-Year High

Driver loyalty to their favorite automotive brand rose slightly (0.4 percentage point) in 2025 to a five-year high of 51.4%, according to the third annual U.S. Automotive Brand Loyalty Study from LexisNexis Risk Solutions.

The year-end analysis shows brand affinity resilience as automakers navigate higher vehicle prices, expanding electric vehicle (EV) options and shifting fuel incentives. Affordability and macroeconomic pressures weighed on drivers, however, with average new vehicle prices surpassing $50,000 and incentives dropping to 6.7% of the average transaction price.

"Loyalty is reemerging as a critical competitive metric," says Dave Nemtuda, associate vice president, vehicle intelligence, LexisNexis Risk Solutions. "At the same time, performance across brands is far from uniform. Some automakers are pulling ahead through loyalty-driven strategies and stronger hybrid retention, while EV loyalty is becoming more fragmented as owners explore a growing number of electric options."

To assess brand-level performance, LexisNexis Risk Solutions analyzed newly purchased vehicles last year compared with those already owned and found:

- **Toyota leads brand loyalty**: Toyota closed 2025 as the industry loyalty leader, posting a 60.2% loyalty rate. Stronger hybrid retention supported this performance, with loyalty among Toyota hybrid owners increasing by 2.5 percentage points to 60.1%.
- **Tesla loyalty softens amid rising EV competition**: After ranking first or second in recent years, Tesla slipped to third place in 2025 with a 55.9% loyalty rate. Among EV owners replacing their vehicles with another EV, loyalty to Tesla declined as more consumers explored competing electric options.
- **Fuel-type dynamics reshape brand retention**: While loyalty to gasoline as a fuel type jumped in the latter months of 2025, it's still expected that owners will steadily replace their gas vehicles with alternative fuel models.

Along with affordability pressures, several macroeconomic and policy-driven factors influenced vehicle purchasing and repurchasing behavior in 2025:

- Despite rising costs, loyalty increased in two of the largest vehicle segments: Large pickup (54.8%) and compact SUV (53%) loyalty rates were both up a percentage point year over year in 2025.
- Policy uncertainty, changes in emissions standards and incentive rollbacks contributed to a slower transition to EVs. EV brand loyalty edged down from 76% in 2024 to 73% in 2025, underscoring the need for automakers to adapt retention strategies as fuel preferences evolve.
- As EVs reduce routine dealer service visits, automakers are being pushed to rethink post-sale engagement and compete more directly on delivering value across the full ownership lifecycle—an area where aftermarket support could make a real difference.

"As automakers navigate shifting strategies and market conditions, consumers are feeling real pressure from higher vehicle prices, lower incentives and federal policy changes," says Mike Yakima, director, vehicle intelligence, LexisNexis Risk Solutions. "Brands that understand these crosscurrents and deliver value across the entire ownership journey—not just at the point of sale—will be best positioned to sustain and grow loyalty as the industry moves forward."

Learn more about the U.S. Automotive Brand Loyalty Study at risk.lexisnexis.com. ***TS***

THE SHOP

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Find (& Highlight) Your Purpose

Companies that know why they're in business are rewriting the rules of resiliency & growth.

BY DREW YANCEY



(Image credit: Vitaliy - stock.adobe.com)



Drew Yancey, Ph.D., is founder and CEO at Teleios Strategy, a premier strategic planning, leadership development, executive coaching and succession planning advisory firm. With a proven track record in high-performance team building and strategic execution for over 15 years, Drew solves challenging problems at the nexus of growth, strategy and innovation. He is co-author of "Leading Performance… Because It Can't Be Managed: How to Lead the Modern Workforce" and a frequent keynote speaker. Visit teleiostrategy.com.

In today's fast-paced, often chaotic business environment, it's easy to lose your footing. Growth brings complexity, competition sharpens and every decision feels high stakes.

Leaders often find themselves stretched thin—chasing new opportunities, managing demands from multiple stakeholders and attempting to streamline operations. It's during this turbulent phase that companies need an anchor to steady the ship and serve as a guiding North Star—a clear, compelling purpose.

"Purpose" is more than a slogan on a wall or an aspiration in a mission statement. It's the guiding "why" that aligns the team, clarifies decision-making and propels businesses forward. A well-defined purpose creates resilience, focus and growth without sacrificing efficiency or profitability.

For aftermarket companies striving to navigate complexity, purpose is not just a nicety; it's a necessity.

THE POWER OF BUSINESS PURPOSE

Purpose-driven companies outperform their peers. According to a Harvard Business Review study, purpose-driven businesses grow three times faster than their competitors. They also experience 46% higher market share growth and see measurable gains in employee engagement, customer loyalty and innovation.

Why? Because purpose cuts through the noise of mid-market chaos, giving leaders and teams clarity about what matters most.

Three critical benefits of purpose stand out:

Employee Engagement & Retention

A strong purpose acts as a magnet, attracting talent that aligns with your company's values and retaining those who feel inspired by meaningful work. Fully 70% of employees define their personal value through their work, and purpose-driven companies tap into that intrinsic motivation.

- According to Deloitte, 90% of employees in purpose-led organizations feel inspired and loyal, while 60% say they'd take a pay cut to work for a company with a clear purpose.
- Purpose also improves retention. A Harvard Business School study found that purpose-driven companies see a 40% reduction in turnover compared to their peers.

Engaged employees are not only more productive but also more likely to advocate for the company. They connect their daily tasks to something bigger, which

"Purpose" is the guiding "why" that propels a business forward.

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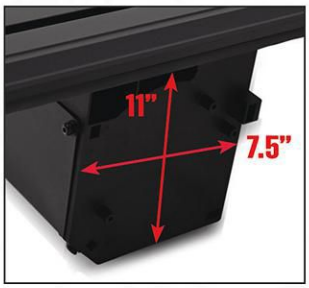
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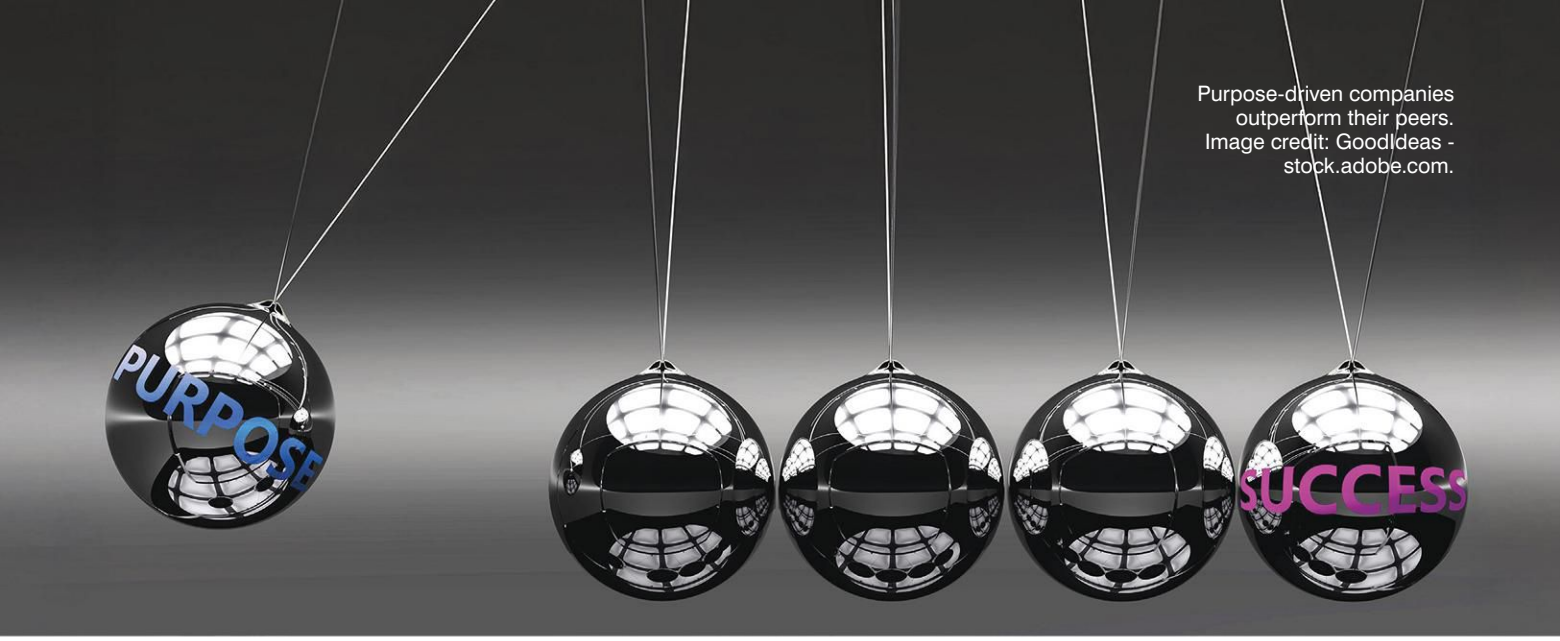


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Purpose-driven companies outperform their peers. Image credit: GoodIdeas - stock.adobe.com.

increases commitment and fosters a cohesive culture—crucial for automotive businesses managing rapid growth and organizational change.

Customer Loyalty & Market Position

Consumers are increasingly demanding that businesses act with integrity and make a positive impact. A clear purpose differentiates mid-market companies from competitors and creates deeper, more authentic relationships with customers.

- Some 77% of consumers prefer to purchase from purpose-driven companies, and these brands experience 30% higher levels of innovation.
- Take Unilever, for example: its "sustainable living" brands grew 69% faster than the rest of its portfolio, proving that purpose can drive both growth and profitability.

For a great number of businesses, purpose can be a key differentiator in crowded markets. It answers the critical question for customers: "Why should I choose you?" A purpose that resonates drives loyalty, repeat business and premium pricing, helping shops compete against both scrappy startups and well-funded giants.

Resilience & Long-Term Growth

In times of uncertainty or disruption—common realities all too often—purpose serves as a compass. Leaders who operate with clarity of purpose are better equipped to make tough decisions and balance competing demands.

- Purpose provides direction during challenging periods, helping leaders prioritize and align resources to their most critical goals.
- Purpose-driven businesses also demonstrate greater financial performance over time. Companies with a clear purpose outpace their competitors by 40%, according to multiple long-term studies.

When companies must scale efficiently while managing growing stakeholder pressures, purpose becomes a stabilizing force. It simplifies decision-making, aligns teams and enables leaders to focus on profitable, strategic growth.

THE BURDEN & CHALLENGE OF PURPOSE

Defining purpose isn't easy, especially for companies emerging from the startup phase. Many leaders assume that purpose is static—something established at a company's founding. In reality, purpose must evolve as the business grows.

AUTHENTICITY & ACCOUNTABILITY

Purpose-driven leadership demands authenticity and visible commitment from shop owners and managers. In today's transparent world, customers, employees and investors demand purpose to be real, not performative.

Leaders must "walk the walk," integrating purpose into strategy, culture and operations. This integration requires discipline.



Once purpose is defined, leaders must embed it into the company's culture, strategy and operations. Image credit: tashatuvango - stock.adobe.com.

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Leaders must align the company's core value proposition with the "jobs to be done" for customers, ensuring purpose translates into tangible value. This approach keeps the business focused on solving real customer problems while staying true to its identity.

FROM MONOLITHIC TO MULTIFACETED

In the early days, a founder's vision often drives purpose—simple, singular and clear. But, as a company grows, purpose becomes more complex. Some businesses serve multiple stakeholders, operate across broader markets and face internal pressures to adapt their purpose for different teams or departments.

The solution lies in a mindset shift: from "monolithic" to "multifaceted" purpose. Leaders must define purpose not as a single statement but as a "purpose prism"—a framework that clarifies purpose across three key dimensions:

1. ***Core purpose:*** The overarching reason the business exists.
2. ***Customer impact:*** How the business solves meaningful problems for customers.
3. ***Organizational values:*** The principles that guide decisions and behaviors.

This multifaceted approach ensures that purpose is both unifying and adaptable, aligning the company across its growing complexity.

THE 'PURPOSE PRISM'

To define and align multifaceted purpose, what I've coined the "purpose prism" approach can prove powerful. It provides numerous points of understanding:

1. ***Clarify the core purpose:*** Start with a single sentence that captures why the business exists. Example: "We exist to help off-roaders build the rig of their dreams."
2. ***Identify customer jobs to be done:*** Map the specific problems your business solves for customers and align them to your purpose.
3. ***Define core values:*** Articulate the beliefs and behaviors that allow your team to deliver on the core purpose consistently.

Once purpose is defined, leaders must embed it into the company's culture, strategy and operations—ensuring it informs everything from hiring and product development to customer service and decision-making.

THE ROI OF PURPOSE-DRIVEN EXECUTION

The benefits of purpose don't happen on their own. Leaders must execute purpose systematically, ensuring it drives results. Consider these steps:

1. ***Communicate relentlessly:*** Make purpose the centerpiece of internal and external communications. Help employees and stakeholders connect their daily roles to the company's purpose.
2. ***Link purpose to metrics:*** Measure purpose-driven outcomes like employee engagement, customer satisfaction and community impact alongside financial performance.
3. ***Align incentives:*** Reward behaviors and results that align with purpose, reinforcing accountability at every level of the organization.

PURPOSE AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Purpose is not a luxury—it's your greatest competitive advantage. It grounds your business, aligns your team and focuses your growth. Leaders who embrace purpose find it easier to navigate the complexities of scaling, turning chaos into clarity and confusion into focus.

Ask yourself:

- Why does our company exist?
- What problems do we solve for customers?
- How do we align our culture and strategy with that purpose?

By answering these questions and embedding purpose into your operations, you can transform into a launching pad for sustainable success. Purpose isn't just about "doing good." It's about driving growth that is profitable, resilient and enduring.

Define your purpose, commit to it and watch your business thrive. ***TS***



Engaged employees are not only more productive but also more likely to advocate for the company. Image credit: MicroOne - stock.adobe.com.

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The off-road rack market has evolved into a premium, lifestyle-driven, highly modular category. (Photo courtesy Fab Fours)

ON TRACK WITH OFF-ROAD RACKS

Sophisticated, versatile cargo carrying systems continue to be a hit with adventure travelers. BY JEF WHITE

If there's one thing adventure travelers can agree upon, it's that they want to take it all with them. From safety and rescue equipment to convenience items and recreational amenities, there's a lot to pack (and unpack!) when you're getting away from it all.

Today's off-road racks offer the style, versatility and carrying capacity that overlanders crave. Efficient designs and custom fits appeal to a wide variety of drivers looking to enhance their favorite trail vehicle.

With the right products and the latest market knowledge, shops can find success selling and installing off-road racks. Suppliers are happy to keep you on track with tips, trends and advice that put even the most ambitious outdoor treks within reach.

DESIGNED TO DO MORE

If it seems like you're seeing more off-road racks on the road these days, there's a good reason—the market has shifted from niche to mainstream, says Travis Stevens, category manager for Thule.

"A decade ago, off-road racks were mostly for hardcore enthusiasts, often requiring major DIY modifications or specialist upfitters. Today, they're a lifestyle accessory embraced by overlanders, weekend explorers and everyday drivers who want versatility, capability and style," he says. "Consumers expect racks to be functional, stylish and easy to install without permanent vehicle changes. In fact, many automakers now offer rack systems as part of factory trim packages, reflecting how integral they've become to the adventure lifestyle."

Another market change is the evolution of off-road racks from fixed cargo carriers to dynamic, modular systems.

"Today's customers expect racks to integrate with tonneau covers, support multiple accessories and adapt as their vehicle use changes over time," says Craig Metcalf, automotive manager for Küat. "Clean designs, premium materials and future expandability now matter just as much as load ratings. This shift has pushed shops away from one-time rack installs and toward long-term, system-based builds."

Versatility is a key aspect, says Katherine Abraham, marketing director for Ironman 4x4.

"There's been a major increase in modularity and ecosystem thinking," she explains. "Customers want racks that can

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Overland Rack for the Jeep Gladiator
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Expandable over-cab extension provides additional cargo space; multiple tie-down and mounting points; 10 integrated 3x3 LED pod mounts; integrated roof access step; optional additional crossmembers; made in the USA with U.S. steel.

Fab Fours
Jason Bukolt
Director of Marketing

HOT PRODUCTS:
RAID Roof Rack and RAID Bed Rack
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Launching soon; designed for a wide range of customers from daily drivers who want clean looks and low noise to off-roaders and overlanders needing strength, modularity and long-term durability; vehicle-specific systems offer premier fit and finish.

Ironman 4x4
Katherine Abraham
Marketing Director

HOT PRODUCT:
Küat IBEX Truck Bed Rack System
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Modular, aluminum bed rack integrates cleanly with most mid- and full-size trucks; supports a wide range of overland, work and lifestyle accessories; strong static and dynamic load ratings; multiple height configurations; efficient, repeatable installation.

Küat
Craig Metcalf
Automotive Manager

HOT PRODUCT:
ACS Roof Rack for the Mercedes-Benz Sprinter 144
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Low-profile system adds only 4 inches to the overall height of the vehicle; adjustable load bars slide into toothed channels; additional load bars can be added; works with T-track accessories from popular brands; made in the USA.

Leitner Designs
Bernhard Leitner
CEO

HOT PRODUCT:
Rivian R1S Roof Rack System With Light Bar Cutout
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Built specifically for the Rivian R1S; light bar cutout designed to fit the major light bar brands; attractive appearance; strong enough for real gear; a platform that can grow with the build.

Overland Ruff Racks by
Overland Vehicle Systems
Michelle Bates
Marketing Manager

HOT PRODUCTS:
Extruded Aluminum Roof Racks
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
New lineup engineered to deliver versatility, strength and value; modularity offers a range of customization options (bed rack, roof rack, full rack, half rack); lightweight, durable aluminum construction; 600-pound static/300-pound dynamic load capacity.

Rough Country
Tim Watts
VP Sales

HOT PRODUCT:
Thule Xscape Premium Off-Road Truck Bed Rack System
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
Built for overlanding and adventure travel; heavy-duty aluminum construction for strength and durability; modular design allows height adjustments for specialized gear, from kayaks to rooftop tents; multiple T-tracks for easy customization.

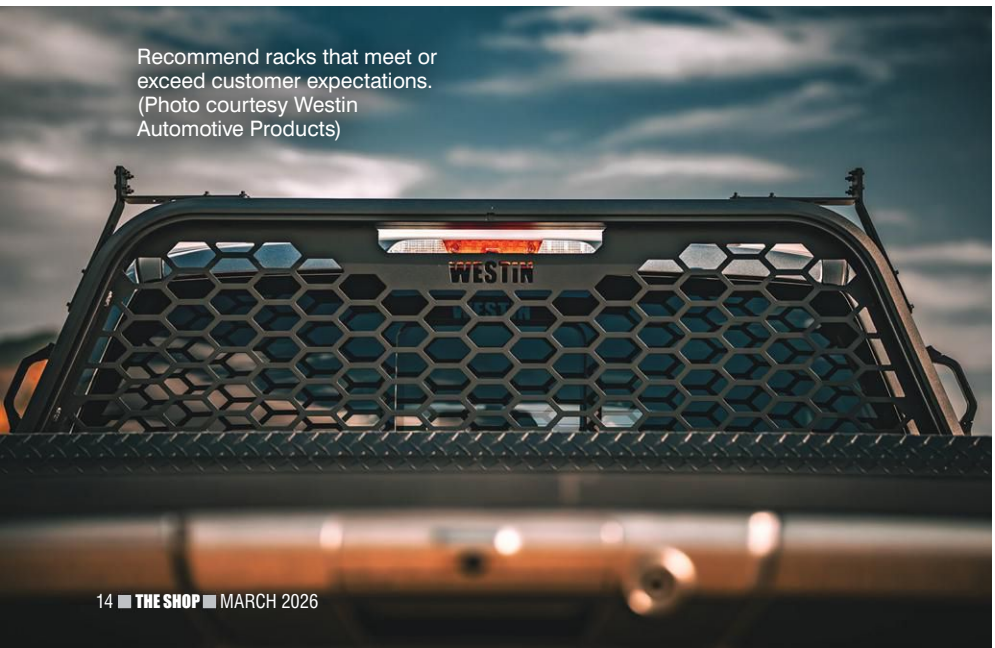
Thule
Travis Stevens
Category Manager

HOT PRODUCTS:
HLR Truck Rack & Mesa Roof Rack
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
HLR features lightweight aluminum construction to protect the rear cab and provide versatile gear support; popular for Jeep and Bronco, Mesa boasts a durable extruded aluminum frame with a sleek powder-coat finish and versatile channel system.

Westin Automotive Products
Tony Savasta
Vice President of Marketing

HOT PRODUCT:
OverHaul HD Shadow Edition
FEATURES & BENEFITS:
All-new rack system includes two adjustable MOLLE panels; delivers the proven strength of the OverHaul HD line.

Yakima Products
Todd Scott
Category Manager – Roof Racks | Truck | HD



Recommend racks that meet or exceed customer expectations. (Photo courtesy Westin Automotive Products)

grow with their needs, supporting tents, lighting, storage and other accessories over time. As a result, shops are seeing more educated buyers who care about fitment, weight ratings and long-term usability—not just price."

The highly engineered, modular systems must deliver an OE-quality fit and finish to resonate with drivers, says Tony Savasta, vice president of marketing for Westin Automotive Products.

"Consumers now demand products that match vehicle aesthetics and provide multi-purpose capability—from hauling gear to mounting lights or tents," he says.

Tim Watts, vice president of sales for Rough Country, says, "modern off-road

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For many rack customers, clean designs, premium materials and future expandability matter as much as load ratings. (Photos courtesy Küat)

racks are now a foundational element of any true adventure setup. The off-road rack market has grown significantly in both size and sophistication, driven largely by the rise of overlanding and adventure-based vehicle use. What was once a simple solution for hauling infrequently used cargo has evolved into a core component of modern off-road and overland setups."

The rise of overlanding created a market that values utility and versatility, says Michelle Bates, marketing manager for Overland Ruff Racks by Overland Vehicle Systems.

"People aren't just buying racks for extra storage anymore," she says. "They're building full platforms that include lighting, tents, recovery gear, awnings and everything needed to go off-grid for days at a time."

Popular accessories are helping drive new offerings, says Todd Scott, category manager – roof racks, truck and HD for Yakima Products. Trends are being set, he observes, through "the increasing range of choices for recovery and water accessories, along with the shift from traditional roof rack systems to platform styles like Yakima's LockNLoad and RuggedLine HD systems."

And as the products have changed, they've also improved in quality to match today's vehicles.

"The off-road rack market has evolved from a narrow, functional segment to a premium, lifestyle-driven, highly modular category, with buyers demanding quality materials, integrated systems and brand experiences that start long before they walk into a store," says Jason Bukolt, director of marketing for Fab Fours.

Smart attachment is important as well.

"There are many new players in the market today and ease of installation has become a major focus," says Bernhard Leitner, CEO of Leitner Designs. "Customers now expect bolt-on systems that do not require drilling, as drilling can risk damaging the vehicle or voiding warranties. Clean installs and vehicle-specific designs are now more important than ever."

BUILDING SOMETHING BETTER

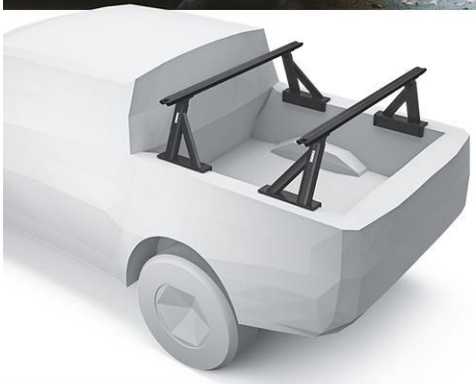
As rack systems become more customizable, it's more important than ever for shops to understand each client's intended use in order to choose the right solution.

"The setup is going to be different for someone who's interested in mountain biking for the week versus a weekend getaway couple with a dog," says Bukolt. "When it comes to installation, knowing what the customer is wanting to do with the rack is key. Why? Because you're going to set up the rack system tailored to their activity or usage."

Asking important questions regarding vehicle use and future build plans should be the starting point, says Watts.

"Overlooking proper mounting, accessory integration and load considerations ultimately undermines the rack's functionality





A professional approach supports safety, confidence and long-term customer relationships. (Photos courtesy Thule)

and the customer's overall experience," he explains.

Bates points to features such as lighting capabilities as reasons to discuss vehicle usage plans before recommending a rack.

"One of the biggest mistakes I see is shops treating racks like a quick bolt-on accessory when, in reality, racks are the base of the entire build," she says. "If the customer plans to add a rooftop tent, storage, lighting or accessories down the road, that changes what rack they should be running. It's always better to start with the right platform rather than upgrade twice."

Metcalf advises shops to view rack systems as entryways into further accessorization rather than a finish line.

"A frequent mistake is treating the rack as a one-and-done product rather than the foundation of a larger system," he explains. "This often leads to mismatched accessories, limited upgrade paths or customers coming back frustrated when their rack won't support

Customers want racks that can grow with their needs. (Photo courtesy Ironman 4x4)







ELEVATE THE ADVENTURE.

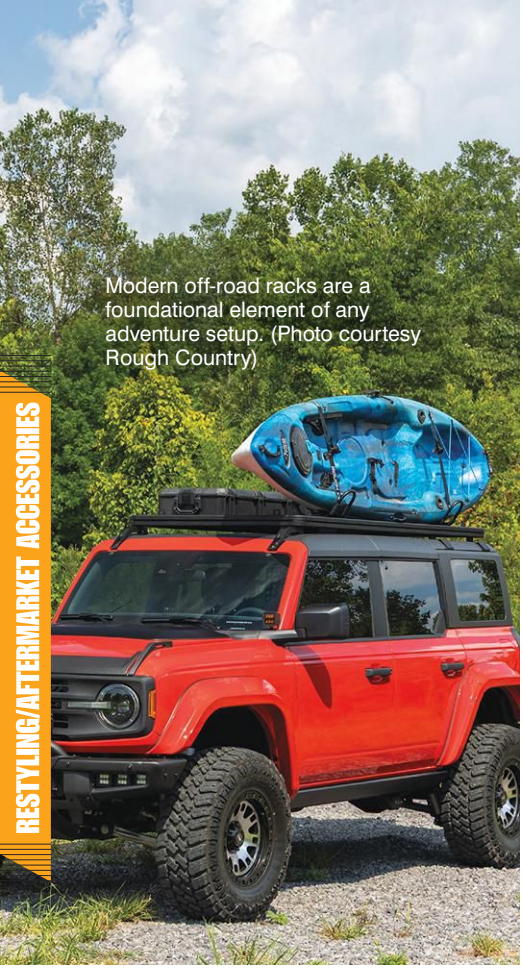
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Modern off-road racks are a foundational element of any adventure setup. (Photo courtesy Rough Country)



Look to deliver personalized solutions. (Photo courtesy Rough Country)

(Photo courtesy Rough Country)





new gear or work with a tonneau cover. Another issue is underestimating how much consistency and install efficiency matter at the shop level."

Entryways, of course, attract new consumers, resulting in an opportunity for professional shops to enhance sales with product education and real-world advice.

"The technical profile of today's off-road consumer has shifted. In the past, a lot of enthusiasts managed their own modifications. Today, buyers are more likely to rely on professional guidance, making it increasingly important for shops to lead on fitment, load capacity and proper installation," says Stevens. "This approach supports safety, confidence and long-term customer relationships."

Abraham advises against shops treating off-road racks as one-size-fits-all solutions, while stressing the importance of clearly explaining features such as load ratings or future compatibility.

"Customers may not understand the difference between static and dynamic loads or how additional accessories affect overall capacity," she says. "Taking the time to walk through use cases and future plans helps avoid mismatched expectations and post-install frustration."

Savasta explains the importance of recommending racks that perform beyond expectations.

"Don't undervalue quality and fitment," he says. "Shops sometimes treat all racks as a commodity rather than explaining differences in materials, corrosion resistance and modular capacity. Not educating customers on these factors can lead to buyer hesitation or warranty issues later."

As a local rack expert, clients will trust your shop to help them avoid future issues, says Scott, such as "selling or installing less-than-ideal choices to underpin rooftop tents."

From there, proper ordering and installation processes aid in shop productivity while maximizing profit potential, advises Leitner.

"A common selling mistake is not confirming the exact vehicle configuration before ordering. With so many options and variations today, this often leads to the wrong part number being ordered," he cautions. "Meanwhile, a common installation mistake is misplacing or skipping hardware during the install, which can lead to fitment or safety issues. Whether the rack ships in one box or multiple boxes, every bolt, bracket and piece of hardware is included and packaged with the system, so it is easy to find and keeps the install moving smoothly."

SECURE ATTACHMENTS

One reason shops enjoy selling and installing off-road racks is the happiness they bring customers. As such, Stevens from Thule advises, "sell the adventure, not just the hardware."

"Position racks as the gateway to aspira-



The rise of overlanding has created a market that values product utility and versatility. (Photos courtesy Overland Ruff Racks by Overland Vehicle Systems)



tional experiences—spontaneous camping trips, overlanding journeys and the freedom of the open road," he suggests. "Pair racks with accessories like rooftop tents, cargo boxes and recovery gear to create complete adventure setups. Showcase real-world builds in-store or online to spark inspiration and drive higher-value purchases. When customers can picture the lifestyle, they're ready to invest in it."

A rack becomes the first step toward a "complete adventure system," says Rough Country's Watts.

"Educating customers on load ratings, mounting options and future expandability helps position the rack as a long-term platform rather than a single purchase, naturally driving add-on sales while delivering a better, more personalized solution," he says.

Capturing excitement requires building trust, say Bukolt from Fab Fours.

"It's all about getting to know your customer and their level of comfort when it

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Clean installations and vehicle-specific designs are more important than ever. (Photo courtesy Leitner Designs)

comes to overlanding. By asking the right questions, you can sell your customer the right overland rack setup for them," he says. "Let's face it, there are a ton of products in the overland space and your customer is relying on you to help them with what to bring and what stays at home. Always start with the basics and don't forget about weight."

When it comes to logistics, Metcalf from Küat suggests viewing off-road racks as a complete product category.



Seeing is believing when it comes to conceptualizing custom rack setups and how they can help drivers. (Photo courtesy Yakima Products)

"Shift to system-based selling. Start with the rack as the anchor product, then build outward with accessories and upgrades over time," he recommends. "Products like our IBEX system make this easy because customers don't have to replace the rack to evolve their setup. That creates higher initial ticket values, repeat add-on sales and stronger long-term customer relationships, all while giving shops a platform they can sell once and build on for years."

Bates from Overland Ruff Racks by Overland Vehicle Systems also advises shops to view racks as the beginning of the build, not the end.

"Shops can grow rack-related sales by offering complete packages like a rack, light bar, wiring and install. This is an easy way to increase the ticket total while delivering a finished, professional upgrade customers are excited about," she says. "At the end of the day, customers want a rack that looks clean, works hard and gives them more options—not more limitations."

Seeing is believing when it comes to



Popular accessories are helping drive new rack designs. (Photo courtesy Yakima Products)

conceptualizing custom rack setups and how they can help drivers, says Scott from Yakima Products, increasing the importance of hands-on experiences.

"Display a vehicle (with a rack system) out front and create in-store rack displays such as a truck bed with product installed," he suggests.

Savasta from Westin Automotive Products has seen the power of specialized product demonstration areas.

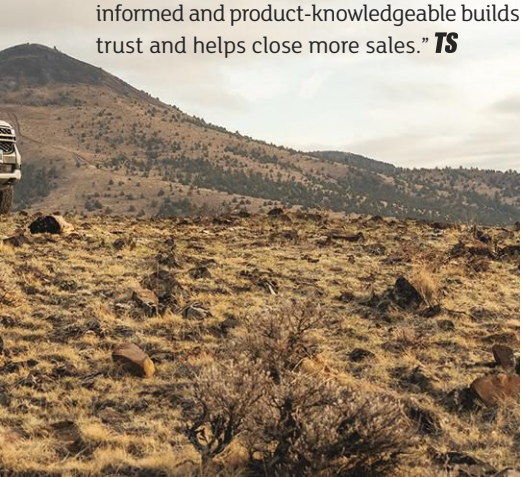
"Display functional demos with all the add-ons," he suggests. "At last year's SEMA Show we displayed our HLR rack with new grab handles, and that simple addition really added to the demonstration of the rack when accessing the bed of the truck. We also showed off our Mesa Roof Rack with a tent installed. Both were real hits."

Ironman 4x4's Abraham agrees that the most effective way to increase rack sales is to show the system, not just the product, while focusing on knowledge sharing.

"Displaying racks installed on vehicles—with lighting, awnings or storage—helps customers visualize how the rack fits into their lifestyle. Bundling racks with common accessories simplifies decision making and increases average ticket value," she says. "Equally important is education. When customers understand why fitment, weight ratings, noise and modularity matter, they're more confident investing in a higher-quality rack—and more likely to return as their build evolves."

Finally, rely on quality suppliers to partner on the entire journey, says Leitner from Leitner Designs.

"Stay in regular contact with the manufacturer to learn about new products and updates. Ask for flyers, display materials and product info to share with customers," he advises. "We regularly send swag packs and marketing materials to our dealers and installers to help support their sales. Staying informed and product-knowledgeable builds trust and helps close more sales." **TS**







Different interior customization levels help shops meet a variety of customer needs. (Photo courtesy TMI Products)

PERSONAL SPACE

Exterior styling may get all the attention, but for many drivers, it's what's inside that counts.

BY JEF WHITE

Exterior vehicle styling may grab all the attention, but for many drivers of custom or classic vehicles, it's what's inside that counts. From upgraded seats and dashes to accessory items and audio enhancements, there are many ways for shops to offer interior upfitting services to new and existing customers.

Whether the demand is for aesthetic or functional improvements, these insider products can have a real effect on an owner's driving experience. As such, interior product suppliers have observations on how shop professionals can positively impact their clients' personal space.

Here are some things to know about interior restyling projects to help get started.

Growing component availability makes interior projects more accessible to shops.

Aftermarket suppliers are constantly working to bring additional interior upfit opportunities to professional businesses.

"The availability of more high-quality bolt-in reproduction and upgraded component parts is making it easier for both shops and home builders to raise the bar on the interiors of their project cars," says Rick Love, president of Vintage Air.

Drivers appreciate aesthetic upgrades.

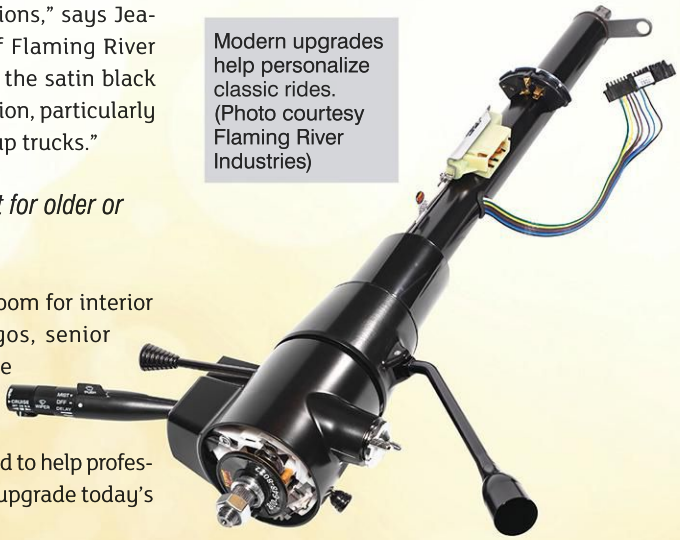
Factory interiors can be a simple starting point for customers looking to create a unique environment.

"Updating interior design has become a preference during restorations," says Jeanette Ladina, president of Flaming River Industries. "We are seeing the satin black finish remain a popular option, particularly with muscle cars and pickup trucks."

Projects aren't just for older or classic vehicles.

Newer vehicles also have room for interior improvements. Jason Digos, senior sales trainer for automotive audio company Modus, says his company's patented technology is designed to help professional shops integrate and upgrade today's modern cars, trucks and SUVs, including electric vehicles (EVs).

"Modern cars are designed with computer-monitored electrical systems, so any excess current demand may cause issues with the drivability of the vehicle," he explains. "Our PREACT technology will allow for upgraded audio systems to be installed in modern vehicles without the excess current demands that come with traditional amplifiers."



Modern upgrades help personalize classic rides. (Photo courtesy Flaming River Industries)



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INTERIOR PRODUCTS

■ **HOT PRODUCT:**
Swipee Deluxe Tilt Steering Column
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Adaptable to many vehicles; provides popular options used in 1980s cars and trucks, including high- and low-beam, wipers and cruise control on the steering column, while maintaining an aesthetically pleasing interior look; different finishes available.

Flaming River Industries Inc.
Jeanette Ladina
President

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Weatherbeater Floor Liners
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Provide all-weather protection for vehicle interiors; laser-measured to work with the company's FormFit Design to give cars, trucks, vans and SUVs a clean look; easy to clean.

Husky Liners
Emily Humphrey
Marketing Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Mezzo Series Amplifiers
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
For automotive and marine applications; patented PREACT current averaging technology allows operation in voltage ranges between 9-58 VDC; patented ACTEQ technology compares and adjusts input and output signals and monitors temperatures.

Modus
Jason Digos
Senior Sales Trainer

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
TMI Bucket Seats
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Purpose-built using molded foam with dense cells that won't break down over time; mandrel-bent 1-inch tubing for strength; a variety of covering materials available, including OE vinyls, premium vinyls, standard leathers and premium leathers.

TMI Products
Ross Berlanga
Director of Marketing

■ **HOT PRODUCT:**
Big 3 Control Panel Kit
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
Operates the company's Gen IV and Gen V climate control systems; billet aluminum bezel; injection molded knobs; high-quality, OEM-feel rotary potentiometers operate blower speed, temperature and air delivery; LED backlighting with blue A/C On indicator.

Vintage Air
Rick Love
President



Understanding product features helps sales teams make a logical pitch.
(Photo courtesy Husky Liners)

Interior refreshes don't have to be expensive.

Vehicle interior upgrade projects don't have to be viewed similarly to a total home remodel. Minor replacements and small updates can have a big effect on driver comfort and experience.

"Budget-conscious customers looking to just update their seats have really helped to sell many TMI Cruiser Collection and So-Cal Seat series," says Ross Berlanga, director of marketing for TMI Products. "These two seat series are budget friendly, with the Cruiser Collection coming in five different vinyl colors with a few contrast color options and the So-Cal seat series offering basic black bucket seats in high or low bolster, with or without headrests."

Like everyone, interior product customers are searching for high quality and lower costs.

"Price has a major influence on consumer decision-making for interior products," says Emily Humphrey, marketing manager for Husky Liners. "We strive to provide the best quality product possible at an affordable price."

Customer education may be required.

Love warns against shops believing that drivers are aware of all the available options and what the best fit might be for their particular interior project.



Interior product customers are searching for high quality and lower costs.
(Photo courtesy Husky Liners)

"Customers are looking for information from shops they trust to help them get the right parts the first time," he says.

A common misconception is that everything must remain original, adds Ladina.

"There are so many new options in dashboards, steering columns, gauges and steering wheels that upgrading to modern options is desirable and a great way to personalize the customer's ride," she notes.

And just because a factory interior has a working component doesn't mean there isn't an aftermarket upgrade available to improve aesthetics or functionality

"A common misconception about floor liners is that the customer already has floor liners and may not understand the benefits of upgrading," says Humphrey.

Quality upgrades enhance the everyday experience.

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Shops should understand how modern vehicle electrical systems are designed, particularly since 48V systems will be coming to all the major vehicle manufacturers soon. (Photos by Jordan Digos Photography/courtesy Modus)

drivers want interior products that won't quickly fade, wear or break.

"Our seat series are made in-house using top technology, including molded foam, mandrel-bent tubed frames and automotive-grade vinyls," says Berlanga.

Shop education may also be required.

Digos explains that successful shops will understand how modern vehicle electrical systems are designed, particularly since 48V electrical systems will be coming to all the major car manufacturers soon.

"It's important to understand the limitations of those and know what aftermarket products are compatible with this new architecture," he notes.

Different customization levels offer something for everyone.

From minor tweaks to full redo's, offering different interior customization levels helps shops meet a variety of customer needs.

"The Cruiser Collection and So-Cal seat series have been selling well with their classic styling, competitive pricing and high quality," says Berlanga from TMI Products.



"If your customer has a longer lead time and wants something more custom, then a complete TMI interior could be the perfect solution, with almost endless options to choose from, all shipped in a box right to your shop."

Product and trend awareness helps shops keep pace with market changes.







Splashy interior touches can make a fun project, like ICON 4x4's 1970 Ford Bronco Roadster edition, even more attractive. (Photos courtesy ICON 4x4)



Aftermarket suppliers are working to bring interior upfit opportunities to professionals. (Photo courtesy Vintage Air)

Love from Vintage Air says one way professionals can maximize interior component sales is by staying up to date on the latest new products from the performance aftermarket.

"When you are busy running day-to-day operations, it's difficult to take the time to be informed—but it's essential," he believes. "Publications like THE SHOP's e-newsletter and press releases from manufacturers are great ways to find new options to offer customers."

Understanding product features allows sales teams to make a logical pitch.

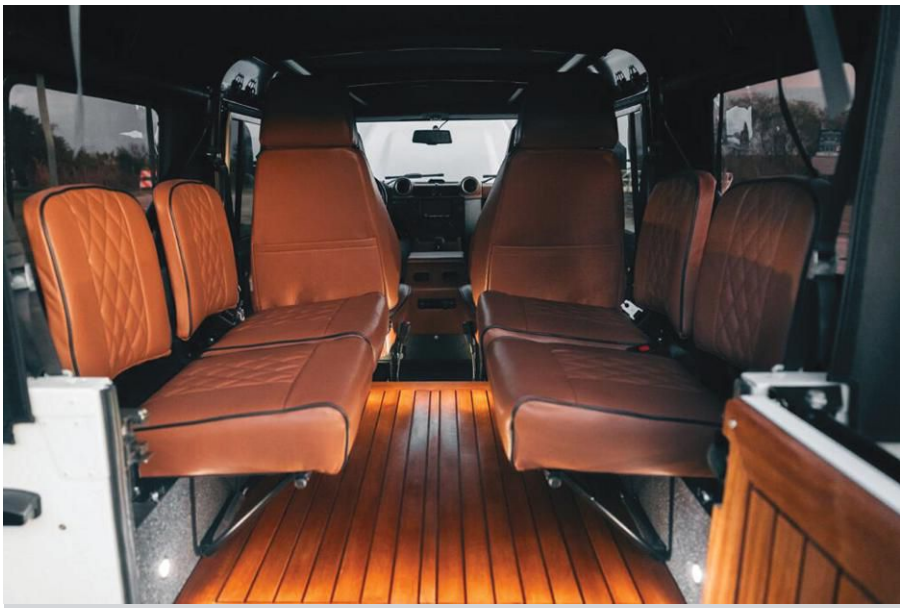
"Outline the benefits of upgrading floor liners," says Humphrey. "Husky Liners floor liners are laser-fit, easier to clean, more comfortable and have a limited life time warranty."

Suppliers will have all the parts and information shop professionals need to create a quality interior upgrade, says Digos from Modus.

"Work with your audio vendors closely," he says. "Make sure they offer ongoing training and their products are compatible with the modern vehicles you're seeing in your shop."

Finally, familiarizing themselves with available options allows professionals to help customers select the design that best fits their dream car, says Ladina from Flaming River Industries.

"Whether it's a key column, push-start column, key in the dash or Swipee column depends on the overall setup the customer is looking to achieve," she explains. "A shop is instrumental in helping the customer select and install the perfect choice." ***TS***



E.C.D. Auto Designs' recent "Project Hatrack" Land Rover Defender 110 highlights the effectiveness of a well-crafted custom interior, featuring a Puma-style dash and complementary leather. (Photo courtesy E.C.D. Automotive Designs)

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The Insiders

TMI Products' 2025 TRIM Award winners offer templates for top interiors.

PHOTOS COURTESY TMI PRODUCTS

Custom auto interior company TMI Products revealed the winners of its fourth annual TRIM Awards during the 2025 SEMA Show. The culmination of a multi-month, multi-stop TRIM Road Tour, the competition spotlights the best TMI-equipped vehicles from across the nation.

Envisioned as a "celebration of interior workmanship and design, in an effort to refocus industry attention from the exterior of vehicles to the painstakingly crafted interiors," TMI's TRIM Awards celebrate winners in 10 categories, including a Fan Favorite online vote and the Best of Show award, which is presented to the top overall interior.

Offering a template for interior shops nationwide, the 10 winners are highlighted here with comments and quotes from TMI Products.

BEST OF SHOW CHAMPION







1969 INTERNATIONAL SCOUT

Owner: Mikey Dascoli

From 3D scanning to machining, printing and trimming, all the interior work was done by Sew Cal Rods. The Scout features a premium interior with modern elements that never stray too far from their original functional vibe.

FAN FAVORITE INTERIOR

1995 CHEVY TAHOE

Owner: Chris Pate

Looking like it came straight out of the 1990s, this unapologetic Tahoe features a full custom interior with an over-the-top, high-end audio system built by MTI Automotive Designs. "Blending modern lines and technology with a comfortable ride," says Pate, "brings this '90s throwback to life."







BEST TMI CAR

1970 CHEVY CAMARO

Owner: Cristopher Cairo

Cairo's car features a complete TMI interior, starting with a pair of Pro Series Low Back Seats with premium CNC-sewn Double Diamond inserts, wrapped in premium black vinyl that matches the triple-black paint job. The theme continues with matching door panels and rear seat upholstery.







BEST TMI TRUCK





1972 CHEVY C10

Owner: Justin Fields

Starting with TMI's Cruiser Collection, the Classic Cruiser buckets were wrapped in the same 511 Brown as the TMI door panels, dash pad and waterfall console for a full-match interior that presents a fresh take on the classic interior. "Everything fits and ties together perfectly. The quality is amazing and the finished product is exactly what I was after," says Fields.

BEST SUV/WAGON

1977 CHEVY K5 BLAZER

Owner: Brandon Burrell

This Blazer features custom door and rear panels, Snowden Custom Seats on custom brackets, APEX Leather premium leather and carpet, a modified dash with Dakota Digital gauges, a full custom console, MTX Audio, an IDIDIT column with a Billet Specialties steering wheel and more. "We went for a clean and classy, all-leather interior with a touch of modern," says Burrell. "Perfect for the vehicle's look."



BEST FULL INTERIOR

1969 FORD MUSTANG FASTBACK

Owner: Jason Engel

This Mustang features a complete TMI interior debuting the company's Pro Series SS2 Race Style reclinable bucket seats wrapped in premium Apex Leather using suede inserts and CNC-sewn Double Diamond stitch with carbon fiber silver stripe insert panels. Other TMI products include a matching rear seat, custom-wrapped molded door panels, square weave carpet, matching center console, matching trunk kit and a suede headliner.







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BEST COLOR-MATCHING INTERIOR

1955 CHEVY 3600

Owner: Miguel Gomez

This category awards the best usage of patterns, colors and stitching that matches the vehicle's exterior. With a contemporary interior that honored the original while tying together the exterior for a cohesive take, it was one of the show's standout pickups.



MOST CREATIVE INTERIOR





1970 PLYMOUTH ROAD RUNNER

Owner: Steve Strope

The Road Runner uses bits from other Mopar offerings including a highly modified dash from a 1966 Plymouth Fury where the hooded speedometer has been changed to a giant sweeping tach, a center console from a 1972 Duster and an overhead console from a 1973 'Cuda Gran Coupe. Strope adds, "the A/C controls are from a 1968 Olds 442 and all of the plastic insert pieces were scanned then altered by removing the factory vertical ribs and replaced with the face texture taken from the new Christopher Ward watch 'The Twelve.' The door panel design is loosely based on the door panels found in 1970 Chargers. The seat inserts were sparked by one of my Robert Graham shirts. The pattern was digitally hand drawn, then sent to a special tannery in Italy where the pattern was printed on the leather. All trim is handmade."

BEST CUSTOM CAR INTERIOR

1962 CHEVY IMPALA

Owner: Rick Maharaj

Looking like a 1960s concept car, the Porsche-inspired Bordeaux leather interior is fully custom and finished with bronze and gold accents that are carried through the cabin and trunk. The front dash combines two 1962 Impala dashes to create a balanced, symmetrical layout, and custom door panels, center console, flooring and latch hardware were fabricated specifically for the build. 3D-printed speaker grilles, bezels and fixtures are used throughout, integrating modern fabrication with classic styling. The build uses a 13,000W PowerBass audio system. "The design keeps a clean, button-free look, with all controls hidden for a smooth, uncluttered appearance," says Maharaj. "Subtle light gray stitching complements the Porsche Chalk exterior. Seats by DJ Design; audio, electronics and interior by Zamz Audio."





BEST CUSTOM TRUCK INTERIOR





1953 CHEVY TRUCK

Owner: Karl Schulman

Called "Mjolnir," this race-inspired muscle truck features an interior completed by John Miller Designs. Anchored with TMI Race Style seats reimagined in APEX Leather's Root Beer leather, the door panels are designed to reflect the tailgate's louvers, and the carpet is a lighter tone that nicely contrasts door panel accents. Other features include a custom dash with one-off trim and Mjolnir shifter. ***TS***



Hitch-Mounted Carrier System

Yakima Products, Lake Oswego, Oregon, presents the EXO System Hitch-Mounted Cargo Carrier. Designed to fit popular hitch receivers, the system can be configured with a single GearLocker as a simple, streamlined setup. Attachments can also be added for two-level cargo handling, including two GearLockers, or a bike carrier or basket over a GearLocker.

Lexus SUV Lift System



Eibach, Corona, California, presents its new PRO-TRUCK-LIFT Stage 2R suspension system for 2024-25 Lexus GX550 Premium SUV models. Delivering off-road performance and capability in one package, the Stage 2R was developed on the trail with the balanced performance and off-road capabilities of the company's PRO-TRUCK Reservoir shock and the damping control of its PRO-TRUCK Coilover 2.0. Made in the USA, system highlights include zinc-coated shock tubes and anodized brackets, 5/8-inch nitrocarburized rods and a piggyback-type design.



Raptor Suspension Components

ICON Vehicle Dynamics, Riverside, California, presents its 3.0 Series High-Performance Coil-Overs and Shocks with CDEV Technology for third-generation Ford F-150 Raptor models. Large 3.0 shocks and coil-overs with remote reservoirs provide increased fluid volume and heat dissipation, while CDEV Technology puts suspension performance in the palm of your hand with electronically controlled damping that adjusts on the fly to instantly optimize for changing speeds and trail conditions. A complete suspension system is available.

Four-Piece LED Kit

Overland Vehicle Systems (OVS), Santa Fe Springs, California, presents its all-new Four-Piece Universal RGBWW LED Light Kit, a versatile, plug-and-play lighting solution designed for interior and exterior use. Featuring customizable color modes, dimming control and multiple mounting options, the kit is IP67 waterproof and dustproof, allowing for use in campsite setups as well as with truck beds, awnings, tailgates and camper shells. Highlights include roll-up storage, magnetic mounts, extension wiring kits and 30 lighting modes.





Universal Rubber Bump Stops

RubberShox, Garden Grove, California, presents its MUB12-LOAD Medium Modular Universal Rubber Bump Stops for light trucks and SUVs, including Toyota Tacoma, Nissan Frontier, Chevrolet Colorado, Ford Ranger and GMC Canyon models. Designed for light to medium loads up to 4,000 pounds at 50% compression, the bump stops replace the OEM parts with no modifications required. The modular design features an interlocking MUB1 top module and MUB2 sub-module that adapt to various suspension heights and load needs.



Two-Door Bronco Top

Bestop, Broomfield, Colorado, presents its Two-Door Bronco eTop. Designed for two-door Ford Bronco models, the top transforms the vehicle from fully enclosed to open-air in seconds at the press of a button. Featuring precision laser-cut steel framing, **Bosch**-powered motors and a nine-layer fabric with triple-layer insulation, the system includes convertible-grade, 30% tinted windows that reduce glare. The windows neatly stack with the top when open and automatically return when closed, offering open-air convenience. ***TS***

PERFORMANCE

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Sound Strategy

BY JOHN CAROLLO

SUCCESS IN THE PERFORMANCE EXHAUST MARKET HINGES ON INGENUITY & EXPERIENCE.

Performance exhaust systems connect with a wide range of customers, delivering sound, horsepower and even aesthetic improvements to vehicles of yesterday and today. Drivers can choose just how loud they want to be and how much attention they wish to draw, while shops can build a strong reputation with top products and quality installations.

Technological advancements allow the systems to work with sophisticated modern vehicles and components, while proven materials ensure they'll provide many years of driving enjoyment.

Shops hoping to offer performance exhaust system sales and installations will want to approach the market with a sound strategy. Manufacturers are ready to help with observations on recent trends, pitfalls to avoid and new product suggestions so customers are not just seen, but heard.

HIGH-TECH COMPONENTS

Even with the category's rich history, enthusiasts may still underestimate the sophistication of today's performance exhaust systems.

"The market has shifted toward application-specific, pre-engineered systems rather

Make customers aware of any drone or excessive sound levels before installing a new exhaust system.
(Photo courtesy aFe POWER)

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PERFORMANCE EXHAUST PRODUCTS

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Gemini XV Series Cat-Back Systems with Remote Exhaust Valves
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Feature dual-mode or active exhaust valves; dual-mode switches between two sound level modes—under normal operation, exhaust passes through the muffler to keep the tone tame, open the exhaust valve via included key fob to bypass the muffler.

aFe POWER
John Gray
VP Exhaust & Exterior Products

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:** Zero Drone T304L Stainless Steel Performance Exhaust Systems
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:**
U.S.-made stainless steel systems include Sport Compact, Truck, Euro and Modern Muscle footprints; patented 180 Technology mathematically eliminates drone frequencies, maximizing performance and ensuring the cabin remains comfortable while the engine note stays pure.

AWE
Jesse Kramer
Chief Marketing Officer

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:** Exhaust Systems Featuring Anti-Drone Technology
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Offer the ability to have high flow, great sound and no drone or resonance inside the vehicle.

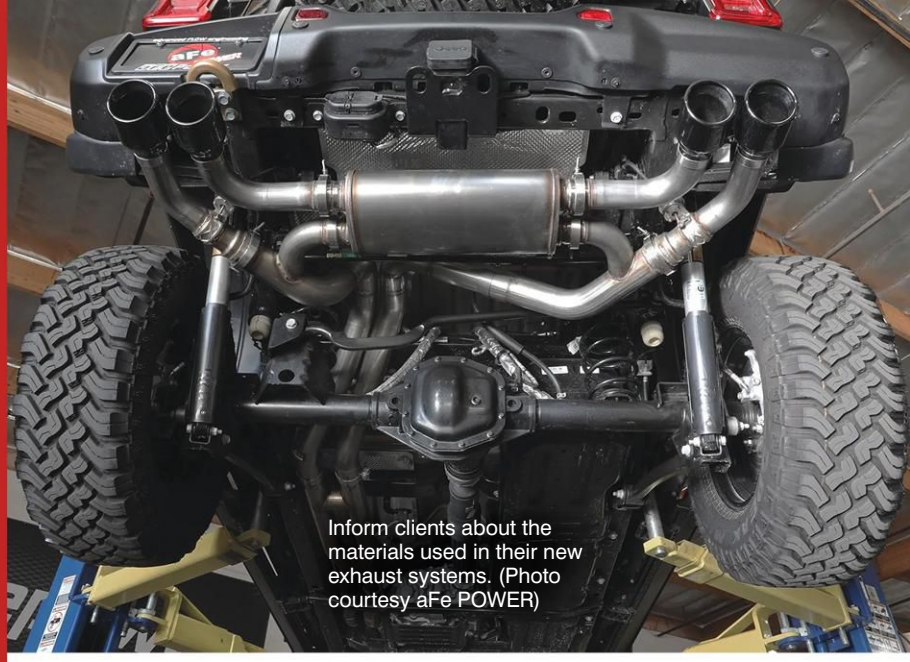
Borla Performance Industries
Tim Sayers
Muffler Development Manager

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:**
Ram RHO Exhaust Systems
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Offerings include the xMOD series for adjustability and the SPEQ for a balance of performance sound and power; both deliver a more punch-and-go presence to the otherwise quiet truck; NDT delivers an aggressive sound and tailpipe volume without drone.

MagnaFlow
Richard Waitas
Corporate Relations/Spokesman

■ **HOT PRODUCTS:** Classic and Late-Model Car and Truck Systems
■ **FEATURES & BENEFITS:** Coverage includes most performance vehicles from 1955 to present; complete solutions from manifold downpipes to OE-appearing tips; mandrel bent using either 409 or 304 stainless steel material; cost-friendly; include all clamps and hangers.

Pypes Performance Exhaust
Dave Gerard
President



Inform clients about the materials used in their new exhaust systems. (Photo courtesy aFe POWER)



than one-off fabricated solutions," says Dave Gerard, president of Pypes Performance Exhaust. "Vehicles are more complex, customers are more informed and shops are under greater pressure to control labor time. As a result, demand has increased for exhaust systems that install correctly the first time and sound the way customers expect."

New vehicle development is helping set the direction for updated exhaust offerings.

"Over the last decade, the market has shifted from basic fabrication to a requirement for high-tolerance precision, mirroring the increasing complexity of modern vehicles," says Jesse Kramer, chief marketing officer of AWE. "AWE's roots go back to Porsche and McLaren applications, where precision is the cost of doing business. We've applied those same rigorous standards to every segment AWE touches today, from Tundras to Civic Type Rs. Consumers are tired of replacing rusted parts; they want a lifetime guarantee from a domestic team they can trust."

Nothing sells an exhaust better than its performance sound. (Photo courtesy AWE)



Aftermarket upgrades must deliver on their promises to surpass factory offerings.

"Performance exhaust has been more thought-out by the OEMs, and their complexity increased as the nature of boost and big power with road compliance has provided much more sophisticated designs," says Richard Waitas, corporate relations/spokesman at MagnaFlow.

System advancements show no signs of slowing, says Tim Sayers, muffler development manager at Borla Performance Industries.

"Vehicle technology continues to evolve," he observes. "Engine technology, engine control technology and exhaust system technology are constantly changing and becoming increasingly complex."

One such OEM change helped direct new product development for aFe POWER, notes John Gray, vice president of exhaust and exterior products.

"The addition of exhaust valves to factory systems over the past 10 years has made it possible to develop exhausts with dual modes," he says. "The exhaust valves aFe incorporates with the Gemini exhaust system work seamlessly with the factory electronics."



New vehicle development is helping set the direction for updated exhaust offerings. (Photo courtesy AWE)

LESSONS LEARNED

Shops looking to become local exhaust system experts will want to have a full understanding of the market and what it



2026 HOT ROD POWER TOUR CELEBRATES ROUTE 66

The 2026 HOT ROD Power Tour will cruise along legendary Route 66, as the world's largest rolling automotive festival helps celebrate 100 years of America's most famous roadway.

Serving as the first of two major HOT ROD events honoring the historic highway's centennial, the Power Tour runs June 8-12, starting in Illinois and ending in Oklahoma while following one of the most nostalgic and culturally important stretches of pavement in American history.

More than 6,000 cars and trucks of all years, makes and models annually join the HOT ROD Power Tour for one or more days, interacting with tens of thousands of automotive enthusiasts and fans.

HOT ROD Power Tour 2026 schedule:

- Kickoff/Day 1: June 8 – Route 66 Raceway, Joliet, IL
- Day 2: June 9 – Village of Rantoul, Rantoul, IL
- Day 3: June 10 – World Wide Technology Raceway, St. Louis, MO
- Day 4: June 11 – Missouri State University, Springfield, MO
- Day 5: June 12 – Tulsa Raceway Park, Tulsa, OK

Register at hotrodpowertour.us.





The 2026 HOT ROD Power Tour will cruise along legendary Route 66 in June. (Photos courtesy HOT ROD Power Tour)

takes to create satisfied customers. Suppliers offer suggestions on areas that may warrant further investigation.

Material variations

Gray notes that shops will want to inform clients about the materials used in their new exhaust system.

"You don't want to sell your customer the cheapest exhaust that will rust or, worse, fail within the first year because of price," he says.

He explains potential material differences this way:

"Exhaust systems are made from three main materials: aluminized steel, 409 stainless steel and 304 stainless steel. Aluminized steel is the cheapest but corrodes from the inside out within a few years. Next, 409 stainless steel lasts longer but rusts on the outside, affecting appearance, though not performance. Finally, 304 stainless steel is the most expensive, but it doesn't rust and maintains its appearance for the life of the system," says Gray.



Demand has increased for exhaust systems that install correctly the first time and sound the way customers expect. (Photo courtesy Pypes Performance Exhaust)

Installation efficiencies

Time is money when it comes to exhaust system installations, with Kramer citing a common critical error made by shops—overlooking the reality of flat-rate labor.

"Saving a few dollars on a cheaper brand often costs hours in fighting poor fitment," he explains, adding that AWE was founded by an installer (Todd Sager, current CEO) and offers a fitment guarantee.

"Exhaust systems that don't prioritize precise fitment lead to wasted time and lower hourly earnings. Once shops understand that an exhaust needs to excel in quality, sound and fitment, they realize brands that don't get this just aren't worth the trouble," says Kramer.

Thoughtful installation procedures mean quicker jobs and more satisfied customers.

"Performance exhaust kits like our Early Muscle Car kits require installation from



New systems match the complexity of today's vehicles. (Photo courtesy Pypes Performance Exhaust)

back to front, which bucks the trend when you are bending a system on the fly. We have fixed locations and limited rotation for the tailpipes, so we build the adjustment into the X- or H-pipe in front of the mufflers," says Gerard.

Early discussions

Customer satisfaction begins at the onset of the sales process with a frank discussion about planned vehicle usage and what drivers want and expect from performance exhaust components, says Sayers.

"Additionally, shops need to spend time managing customer expectations of what the products will and will not provide," he adds.

Strike the right tone

Most customers know that an amplified performance exhaust sound is part of the experience. However, Waitas states that, in many cases, louder isn't automatically better.

"Selling acoustic volume over quality of tone can often lead to buyer's remorse with ear fatigue, making what should be a pleasant driving experience one riddled with body rattles and uncomfortable driving conditions," he explains.

MUSIC TO SHOPS' EARS

Whether as the main focus of a visit to your shop or as an exciting potential add-on sale, performance exhaust systems are popular with a wide client base.

"When customers purchase other appearance and performance improvement

Continued on page 39



SHELBY AMERICAN INTRODUCES NEWEST SUPER SNAKE MUSTANG



Shelby American debuted the 2026 version of its flagship Shelby Super Snake during the Barrett-Jackson Collector Car Auction in January. (Photos courtesy Shelby American)

Shelby American, a wholly owned subsidiary of Carroll Shelby International Inc., debuted the 2026 version of its flagship Shelby Super Snake during the Barrett-Jackson Collector Car Auction in January. The iconic performance cars offer 830-plus hp and serve as the longest-tenured new vehicle model based on the Ford Mustang in Shelby's history.

"The Shelby Super Snake Mustang has continuously evolved and improved since we reintroduced it for the 2007 model year, four decades after the first car became an immediate sensation," says Joe Conway, Shelby American CEO. "Based on Ford's world-class Mustang sports car, the Shelby Super Snake name is now synonymous with American high performance."

The first time the "Super Snake" Shelby name appeared was a big-block Cobra roadster in 1966. It was followed by the Super Snake Dragster campaigned by Don Prudhomme in NHRA. The first Shelby Super Snake Mustang was built in 1967 for Goodyear Tire Company high-speed testing.

Shelby installed a detuned version of the 427-ci big-block racing engine into a new Shelby Mustang. This Super Snake prototype set speed records but only one was built by Shelby American. A few decades later, Shelby revived the Super Snake Mustang, with the 2026 model reaching an entirely new level.

"Over the years, the Shelby Super Snake has evolved but kept its fierce competitive personality," says Gary Patterson, president of Shelby American. "Every aspect of the vehicle is modified and upgraded. The Shelby Super Snake has become our flagship car, as well as the longest running model based on the Ford Mustang in our history."

Built on the latest S650 Ford Mustang platform, the 5.0L powered Shelby Super Snake is available with either 480 or 830-plus hp with optional supercharger. Weight reductions come from a proprietary aluminum hood and carbon fiber fenders that redirect airflow for superior cooling. Lightweight magnesium wheels cut rotating mass and a carbon fiber tail wing plants the tuned suspension firmly on the road.

New styling elements include gunmetal finish wheels and optional Orange Fury exterior color. The 2026 model is available with a manual or automatic transmission, as well as in either a fastback or convertible configuration. A total of 300 will be available in the U.S.









Application-specific components can help alleviate compatibility issues and provide repeatable improvements.
(Photos courtesy MagnaFlow)

products like wheels and tires, induction upgrades, ignition upgrades, etc., let your customers know that you also offer performance exhaust products," says Borla's Sayers.

If drivers need some convincing, start with the emotions these systems can evoke.

"Selling performance is sensory, yet many shops struggle to convey the experience before the box is opened," says Kramer. "The solution is leveraging high-quality media to let the product speak for itself. AWE supports this by being fully ACES and PIES compliant, making it easy to pull data and video content directly into sales presentations. Nothing sells an exhaust better than the audio, so shops should maximize the use of AWE's video and audio assets."

More practical clients may be interested in performance specs and impacts on the overall driving experience.

"Learn what the materials, features and benefits of an exhaust system are to better match what your customer's needs are," says Gray from aFe POWER. "Also, qualify your customer. Outside sound and inside cab sound change with engine rpm levels. Make sure your customer is aware of any drone or excessive sound levels before installing any exhaust system."

Application-specific components can help alleviate compatibility issues and provide repeatable improvements, notes Waitas of MagnaFlow.

"While the cliché 'out of sight, out of mind' might apply to the visual part of the vehicle, don't forget







Performance exhaust systems are popular with a wide client base. (Photo courtesy Borla Performance Industries)

the aural aspect," he suggests. "You want customers to say they 'found their sound' at your shop."

Finally, partner with quality manufacturers to ensure your shop stays on top of the latest products and market trends.

"You can sell it if you believe in the brand," says Gerard from Pypes Performance Exhaust. "So, look for brands that support you—not only with discounts, but with tech support, inventory readiness and pride in their products. Develop those relationships and sales will follow." ***TS***

HSR & VSCDA ANNOUNCE THE NORTH-SOUTH GT CHALLENGE



Officials from Historic Sportscar Racing (HSR) and the Vintage Sports Car Drivers Association (VSCDA) have introduced the all-new HSR and VSCDA North-South GT Challenge, showcasing the popular era of GT-3, GT-4 and GT Lite (GTL) race-prepared, small-bore GT cars throughout the North and South regions this year.

The unique championship features five races—four VSCDA events and one HSR race—in the North, along with a trio of HSR races in the Southeast. The season began in February at the HSR Sebring Pistons and Props presented by Alan Jay Automotive Network at Sebring International Raceway.

Downsized versions of 1990s-era Trans-Am, IMSA GTO/GTS and All-American GT (AAGT) cars, the GT-3, GT-4 and GTL machines are tube-frame and winged full-competition cars powered by race-prepared small-bore engines and fitted with the bodywork of the top small sports cars, coupes and sedans of the day. Popular GT-3, GT-4 and GTL machinery includes the Mazda RX-7, Toyota Celica, Nissan 200SX, Acura RSX, Mazda RX-3 and other familiar compact sports cars and sports sedans of the era.

"For me and so many others, GT-3, GTL and even their GT-4 counterparts truly represented a golden era in American road racing leading into and at the turn of the century," says John Doonan, HSR president. "As these cars reach the end of their competition cycle with other racing organizations, we have heard from several competitors—some already racing in HSR and VSCDA—looking to find a new home for these quick little cars they love to race and our fans love to see. It's an honor to once again partner with VSCDA in creating this exciting new championship that is in direct response to what so many competitors are seeking."

The remaining 2026 schedule includes:

- April 23-26 – HSR South, Michelin Raceway Road Atlanta
- May 16-17 – VSCDA North, Gingerman Raceway
- June 11-14 – HSR South, Watkins Glen International
- June 19-21 – VSCDA North, Blackhawk Farms
- Aug. 14-16 – VSCDA North, Grattan Raceway
- Sept. 18-20 – HSR South, Michelin Raceway Road Atlanta; VSCDA North: Road America
- Nov. 11-15 – HSR and VSCDA GT Challenge Final, Daytona International Speedway

The all-new HSR and VSCDA North-South GT Challenge showcases the popular era of GT-3, GT-4 and GT Lite (GTL) race-prepared, small-bore GT cars. (Photo courtesy Historic Sportscar Racing)



Miata Clutch Kits

Centerforce, Prescott, Arizona, presents a variety of new Clutch Kits for 1990-2005 Mazda Miata 1.6L- and 1.8L-equipped models. Centerforce II kits offer builders increased holding capacity from the stock clutch setup without losing the creature comforts of a smooth, lightweight pedal feel. The Dual Friction setup increases torque capacity to withstand increased transmission strain and load. Both kits include everything needed for installation, including hardware, instructions and a clutch adjustment tool.

2026 Mustang GT Supercharger Kits



ProCharger, Lenexa, Kansas, presents its Supercharger Kits that add 325 hp to otherwise stock Ford Mustang GT and Dark Horse models. Calibrated and designed to maintain the factory dual throttle bodies for performance and emissions compliance, the complete turnkey systems include 100% billet brackets, head unit and impeller. A P-1X head unit and shared drive, proven to 1,000-plus hp and 18-plus psi, comes standard, along with a custom-tuned PCM. The reversible kits include a large air-to-air intercooler and fuel system upgrades.



Tacoma Cat-Back Exhaust

BORLA Performance Industries, Johnson City, Tennessee, presents its Cat-Back Exhaust System for 2024-25 Toyota Tacoma models that improves horsepower and torque. System 141007 features Quarter-Wave Tuner technology and delivers the classic S-Type sound with no drone or resonance inside the vehicle. The climber/rock crawler system is made from T-304 stainless steel and features dual tailpipes with turn-down tips and all-welded construction for durability and long life.

Bronco/Ranger Raptor Tuning

COBB Tuning, Austin, Texas, presents its Accessport ECU tuning for Ford Bronco Raptor and Ranger Raptor models. Offering horsepower and torque gains with COBB Off-The-Shelf (OTS) calibrations and custom ProTunes, the system allows real-time vehicle data monitoring with up to six configurable on-screen gauges and detailed data log recording with the push of a button. Switch between maps to match fuel quality, driving conditions or desired power output and adjust tire size for speedometer calibrations.





F-250 Torque Converters

FTI Performance, Deland, Florida, presents its 10R80 Torque Converters for Ford F-150 trucks. The 10-inch billet lockup converters feature a computer-designed, CNC-machined billet stator and a billet lockup piston to alleviate premature clutch wear. With custom stator designs and multiple blade angle pumps, stalls are available from 2,800 to 4,400 rpm. Each converter is custom built to exact needs and driving style. Highlights include furnace-brazed, heli-welded fins and a severe-duty sprag.



Racing Brake Pad

Wilwood Racing, Camarillo, California, presents its D-154 Caliper Tuning Brake Pads for racing applications. Featuring a proprietary compound specifically for tuning chassis, using a compound BP-00 brake pad in the right front caliper of a GM metric single piston floater, model D-154 will assist in turning the car in traction, which is especially helpful on racetracks with tight left corners. The high-resistance compound generates heat without the coefficient of friction that other racing materials are designed to provide, with improved wear characteristics. ***TS***

The Northwest's Subaru Specialist

Primitive Racing serves Subie owners & rally racers looking for adventure.

BY ANDY LILIENTHAL



Rally racing is what got owner Blake Lind into the upfitting business. (Photo by Andy Lilienthal)



Andy Lilienthal is an award-winning automotive journalist who's written for a host of online and print publications. He worked as a communications manager in the automotive aftermarket for 17 years, primarily in the off-road and overland spaces. He also has a penchant for unique cars and vehicle-based adventures.

Automotive parts and customization shops come in all varieties. Some have broad product offerings, while others have specific niches. One of those niche-oriented businesses is Primitive Racing in Tigard, Oregon.

The shop mostly caters to Subaru owners who want to outfit their all-wheel drive vehicles with better underbody protection, improved suspension and other parts to make them go farther and faster. Whether it's increasing off-road capability to get to a trailhead or building a full-fledged rally car, Primitive Racing has made a name for itself—not only in the Pacific Northwest but nationwide.

PRIMITIVE RACING'S HISTORY

Primitive Racing was founded in 1998 by rally racer Paul Eklund and is located about 20 minutes southwest of Portland. Blake Lind began working at Primitive in the fall of 2009 and purchased the business from Eklund in 2019.

Serving as the go-to place for Subaru enthusiasts and rally racers alike means the shop's customer base is a mix of daily drivers and motorsports participants. Primitive Racing also services a smattering of other vehicle brands and types with a host of upgrades.

"Our customers run the whole spectrum of how they use the products," says Lind, "I think a large chunk are (buying products) for 'just in case' or 'nice to know it's there' (scenarios). We do also have some really hardcore guys pushing the limits of what a Subaru can do."

Lind points out that the majority of Primitive Racing's customers are Subaru SUV/CUV owners that do a little off-roading and want to bolster their car's capability. "(They) add protection (like skid plates) for peace of mind."

SELLING SKID PLATES

Whether it's a casual Subaru owner who wants to protect their vehicle's undercarriage from damage while going to a hiking trailhead, someone looking to armor-up their Outback for overlanding trips or a rally racer who is looking to guard against damage on a high-speed stage trail, Primitive has something for most Subarus—often in the form of front, mid and rear differential protection. In fact, Lind says Primitive offers its skid plates for nearly every Subaru model and year going back to the early 1990s.

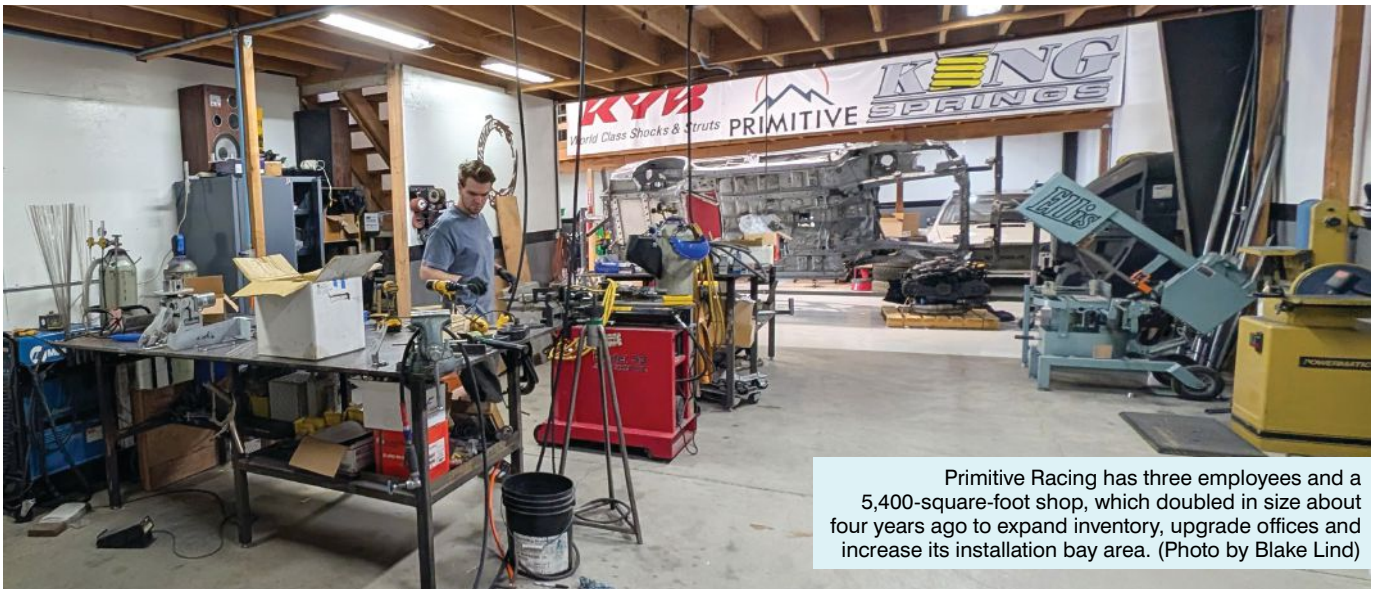
Primitive's bestselling products are its own skid plates, which it makes in-house. Lind points to them being a great value, and that they've been meticulously developed from years of experience and customer feedback. However, the protective plates aren't the only products Primitive carries. The shop also offers plenty of suspension components from various brands.

Hot sellers include shock absorbers from Bilstein and KYB, as well as coil springs from Australia's King Springs. Brakes, engine and performance products, exterior accessories, factory replacement parts, safety gear and wheels are also available. These parts can help transform a customer's vehicle into a more adventure- or rally-ready rig.

Lind estimates his sales split is 50/50 between Primitive's own products and the other brands it sells. He identifies other hot



Popular projects include adding better underbody protection, improved suspension and other parts to make Subies go farther and faster. (Photo by Andy Lilienthal)



Primitive Racing has three employees and a 5,400-square-foot shop, which doubled in size about four years ago to expand inventory, upgrade offices and increase its installation bay area. (Photo by Blake Lind)

sellers as Speedline wheels (the shop is the U.S. importer), Reiger Rally suspension, and high-end rally suspension products that can often start at prices of $7,500 and up.

On the wheels front, Primitive offers adventure- and rally-centric brands such as Method, Sparco and Speedline. While Method is more of a mainstream brand, Sparco and Speedline are well-known brands in the rally racing world. Primitive also offers wheel accessories such as lug nuts and wheel studs.

Lind says the shop previously dabbled in tires, but shipping them was difficult so it chose to focus priorities elsewhere.

A UNIQUE NICHE COMBINATION

Primitive has three employees and a 5,400-square-foot shop, which doubled in size about four years ago to expand inventory, upgrade offices and increase the installation bay area. The business is a unique combination of manufacturer, e-commerce company, importer, installer and rally car builder.

While most of Primitive's business comes via its website, the company still has a store-

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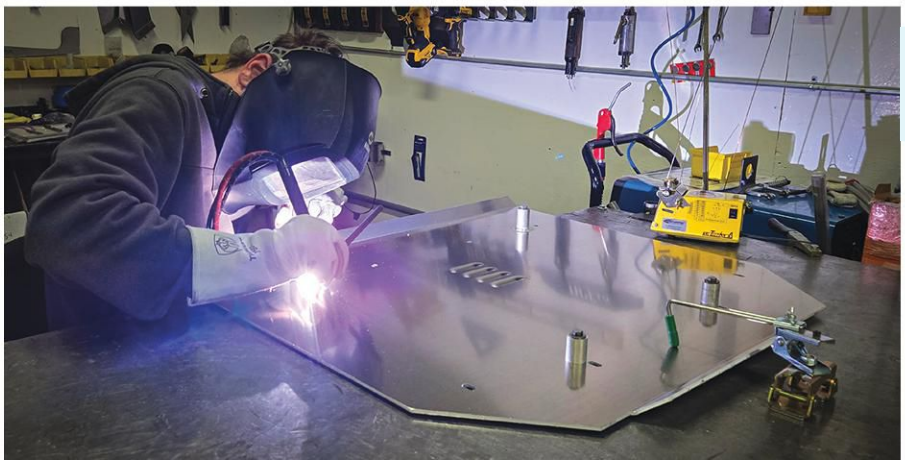
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Oregon's Primitive Racing caters to Subaru owners who want to outfit their all-wheel drive vehicles. (Photos by Andy Lilienthal)

front and takes orders over the phone—something Lind acknowledges is rarer these days.

"Rally is what got all of us into this business. We have our own rally cars, and we also build rally cars for customers," Lind says.

Primitive does everything from basic installations to full builds of rally racing vehicles. On a recent visit, it had a fully stripped Subaru WRX body on a rotisserie. The entire thing had been torn down, with the team in the process of building it from the ground up to be a stage rally car, complete with roll cage.

"We open the bay for installation of our own kits and parts middays, Tuesday-Friday," Lind explains, noting installation isn't a major part of the company's business. And, while most projects come from the Subaru crowd, owners of rally-centric vehicles like the Ford Festiva and Mitsubishi Lancer EVO also patronize Primitive.

The shop will collaborate with other businesses when needed, Lind adds.

"It's a small market and we try to cooperate with like-minded brands where possible, like Rally Innovations, MeLe Design Firm, Nameless Performance and Rally. Build," he reports.

Many of these brands also have roots in rally cars and sell parts for street vehicles, just like Primitive.

While building rally cars is a niche inside a niche, Lind notes that over the last five years, there's been a boom in SUV/CUV parts, particularly with Subaru. While he sees the trend beginning to cool off, it's still popular.

There are pros and cons to having such a narrow focus. Lind says the pros include Subaru of America being on a roll selling cars, so the shop has a growing customer base. One downside, however, is that business can be subject to whatever cars are currently popular, forcing Primitive to stay within the limits of what Subaru produces.

PRIMITIVE'S CHALLENGES

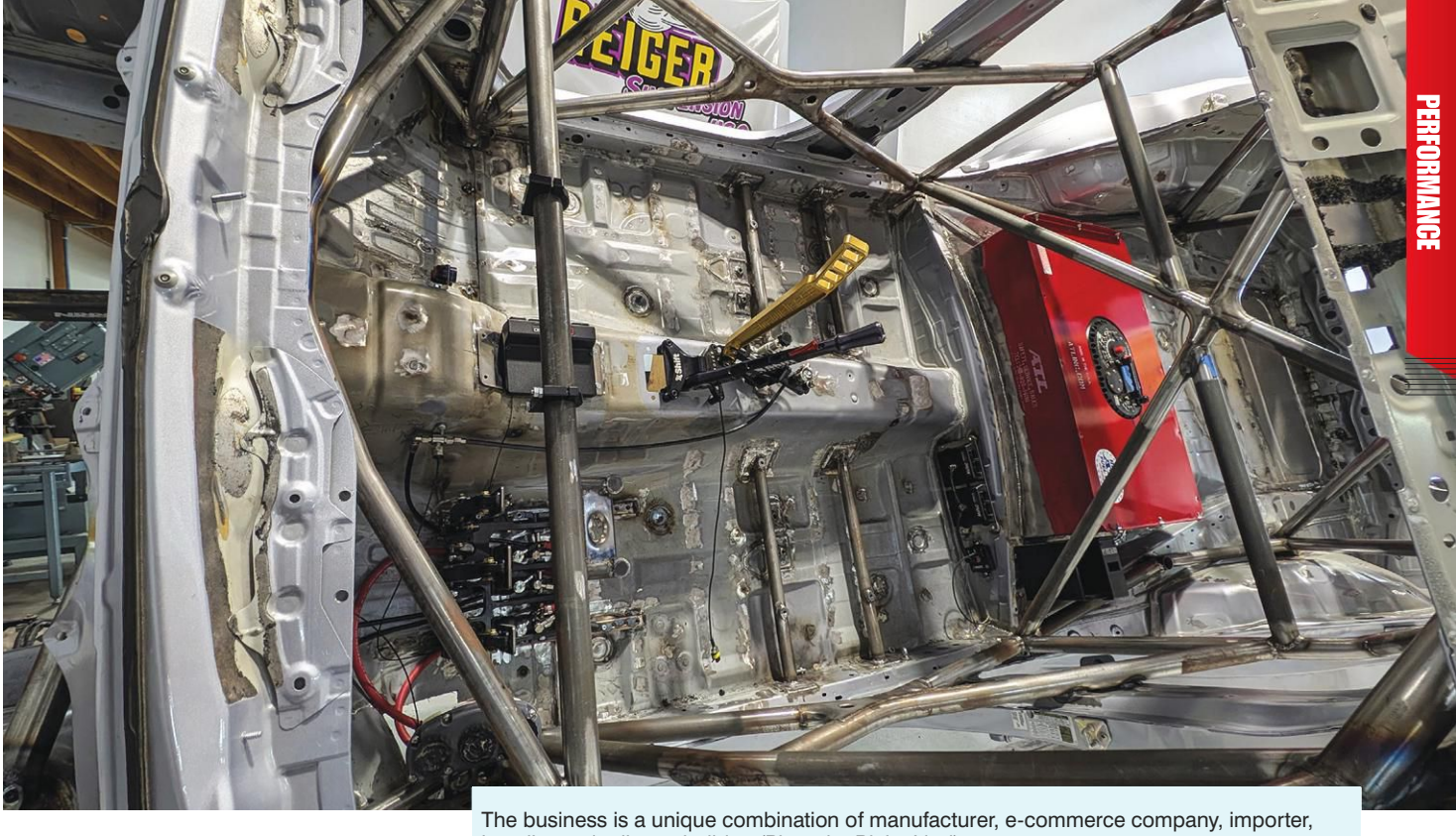
Like many businesses, Primitive Racing has found supply chain disruptions to be one of its biggest challenges.

"We had huge disruptions in 2021 that have continued to have a ripple effect, and tariffs have seemed to reignite them in some cases—or, at the very least, slowed the return to 'business as usual,'" he reports.

On the topic of tariffs, Lind calls them "a challenge," noting his business sells a lot of imported auto parts, although none from China. Most of his parts, such as King Springs, come from Australia, with many other parts manufactured in Europe, where the rally scene is very popular.

He also has to purchase raw materials for his own manufacturing.

"We manufacture (our skid plates) from raw aluminum and steel. All those things have been impacted by tariffs. Paying the tariffs has been one thing, but the uncertainty they have brought has probably been worse," he says. "We did a certain amount of stockpiling preceding (tariffs) as well as a sort of pause, waiting to see what the policies would be."



The business is a unique combination of manufacturer, e-commerce company, importer, installer and rally car builder. (Photo by Blake Lind)

META MARKETING

Since Primitive Racing (get-primitive.com) serves such a specific niche, its marketing also has to be specifically targeted. Lind says Primitive has had particularly good luck with Meta (Facebook/Instagram) ads, stating his demographic aligns very well with Facebook. The business works with an agency to help produce content.

When asked about the best part of his job, Lind jokingly points to driving rally cars.

"As for actual work, I enjoy the product design the most," he adds, highlighting the satisfaction of turning a vision into reality.

He's also very proud of some of the builds Primitive Racing has done—particularly a 2013 Subaru XV Crosstrek project for a local dealership.

"We dubbed it the Desert Edition. It was a khaki color and we hydro dipped some of the panels in a desert digital camo," he recalls, noting the build went "pretty viral" and was among the first "off-road Subaru builds that kind of started it all."

The project included the company's front light bar plus Warn Industries driving lights, a Superwinch winch with synthetic rope and a custom mounting plate. The front and rear bumpers both wore the aforementioned digital camo (as did the radio bezel), and the rear bumper had a rear bar for added protection from obstacles. Of course, there were Primitive Racing skid plates, and the car was lifted on King Springs and rolled on BFGoodrich all-terrain tires mounted on Sparco Terra wheels.

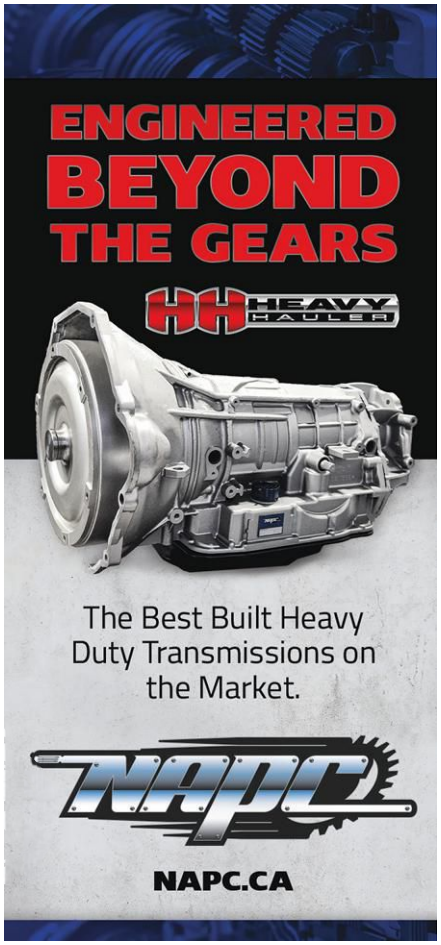
As for what the future holds, Lind reveals, "my next big projects are going to be increasing manufacturing capability and bringing more processes in-house," with the goal of making each Subaru the best that it can be. ***TS***




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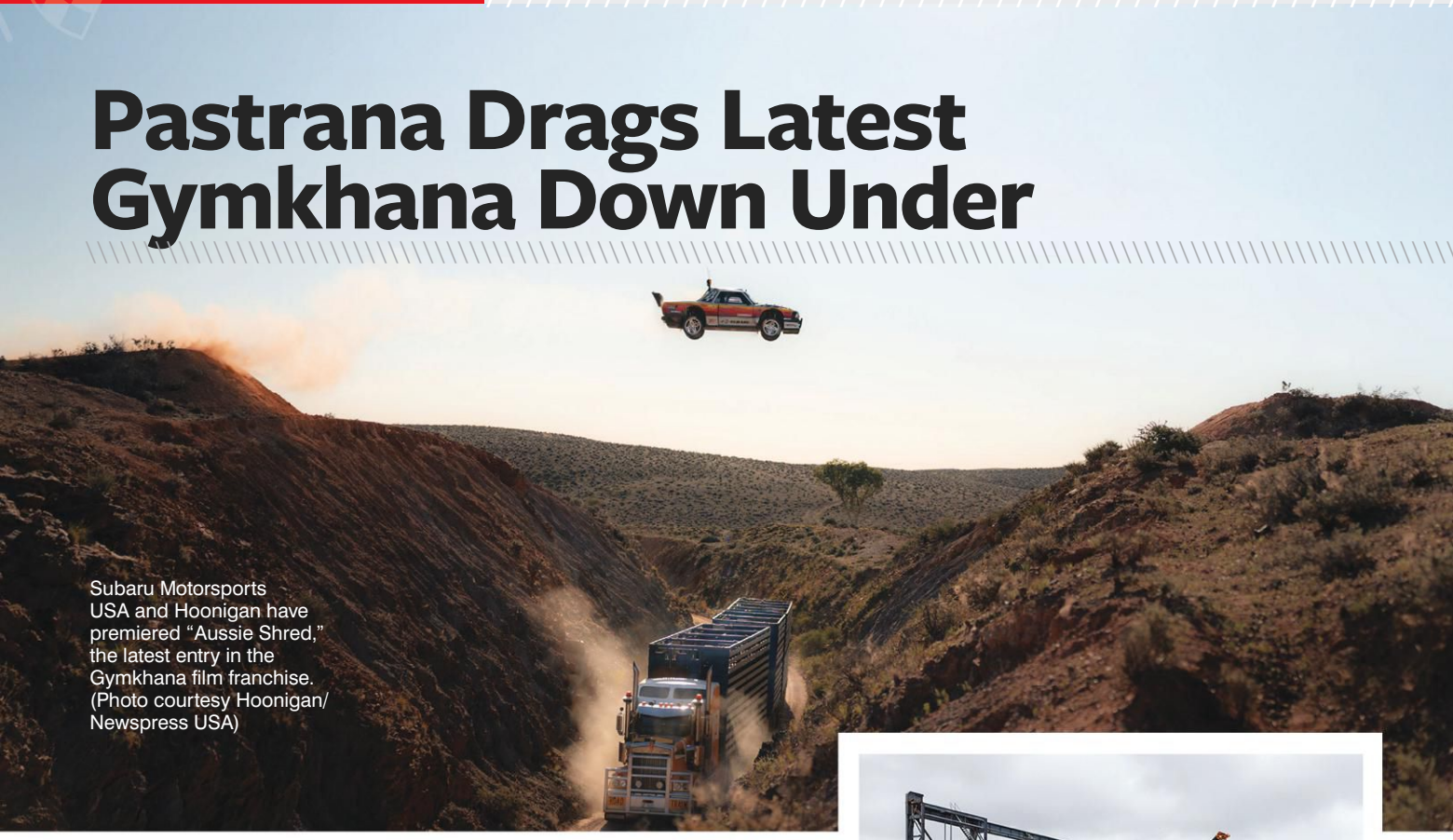
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Pastrana Drags Latest Gymkhana Down Under



Subaru Motorsports USA and Hoonigan have premiered "Aussie Shred," the latest entry in the Gymkhana film franchise. (Photo courtesy Hoonigan/Newspress USA)



Travis Pastrana's third Gymkhana film is the wildest yet, featuring bigger jumps, closer calls and crazier tricks. (Photo courtesy Hoonigan/Newspress USA)

Subaru Motorsports USA and Hoonigan have premiered the latest entry in the internet-breaking Gymkhana film franchise, "Aussie Shred." Set Down Under in the land that coined the term "hoon," Travis Pastrana's third Gymkhana film is the wildest in franchise history, officials say, featuring bigger jumps, closer calls and crazier tricks.

Pastrana takes on the Outback, Sydney Harbour and Bathurst's Mount Panorama, among other locales, behind the wheel of the Subaru "Brataroo" 9500 Turbo, a reimagining of a 1978 Subaru BRAT engineered as a purpose-built Gymkhana weapon.

Subaru of America and technical partner Vermont SportsCar (VSC) crafted the Brataroo to corner, slide and fly well beyond the capabilities of its predecessors. The rallycross-derived machine features a turbocharged 2.0L boxer engine delivering 670 hp and 680 pound-feet of torque and revving to more than 9,500 rpm.

"The Brataroo is hands down the craziest Gymkhana car we've ever built," says Pastrana. "Every part of this car was designed to take the abuse we threw at it while making this film—from hanging two tires off a pier to flying 160 feet across a 10-story-deep canyon gap over a road train to skimming across a deep lake, and scaring myself every step of the way."

In true Gymkhana fashion, the film features a host of cameos from local motorsport icons, including two-time Dakar Rally champion Toby Price; Subaru WRC driver Chris "Atko" Atkinson; and Nitro Circus BMX riders Ryan Williams, Jaie Toohey and Will Brown; alongside a field of V8 Supercar drivers who challenged the Brataroo to a rolling drag race down Mount Panorama's Conrod Straight.

The star-studded lineup also includes Moog and Marty of Mighty Car Mods, the last of the V8 Interceptors and the Mad Hueys performing the noblest of Aussie traditions, the "shoey."

"Australia had long been at the top of the list of potential Gymkhana Film locations," says Brian Scotto, 321 Action director and Hoonigan cofounder. "Ken Block and I attempted to shoot 'Gymkhana Nine' there, but were met with a resounding 'no,' because of the climate of anti-hoon laws at the time. A decade later, when we reapproached the Australian government, we were met with open arms. This combination of the unfinished business we had Down Under and this being Pastrana's last film in the series not only makes it very special to me, but also put the pressure on to push the limits of what we could do, both in the car and behind the camera."

"Aussie Shred" explores Australia like no other film before, organizers add. The juxtaposition of the bustling harbor and the red sands of the Outback create a memorable setting, with due homage to the previous films of Block, whose vision transformed a passion for driving into a global cultural phenomenon with the original "Gymkhana Practice" film. View it now on the Hoonigan YouTube channel.

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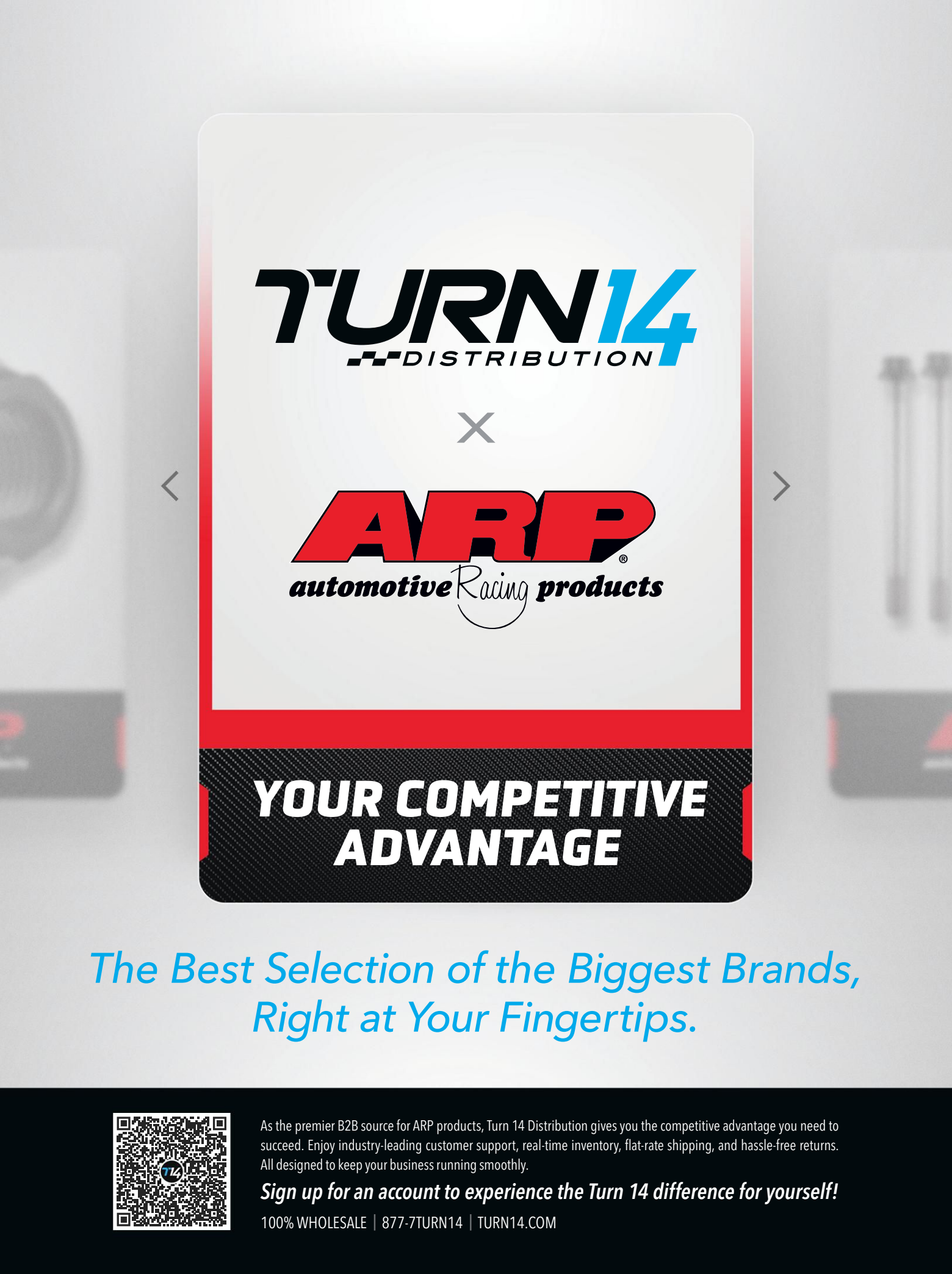


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