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"LIFETIME" ISN'T AS LONG AS YOU THINK

By Mike Perkins

BMW CCA Technical Advisor

Owner - Bavarian Machine Specialties

After 229,000 miles and 16 years of service and repair work, the Alpine white 5 series was going to be sold to its second owner. I received a call from the lady who owned it informing me of the proceedings so I would know who the new owner was and could therefore continue maintaining the car for him. She also started asking me questions about the purchase of a new BMW. This is not an uncommon situation, one that I see in my business quite often; long term ownership followed by a repeat purchase of another BMW. The questions she was asking me, however, gave me pause for thought concerning the contrast in ownership from the BMW she just sold to the 2001 model she was about to purchase. It is important to understand that this woman was not selling the car because it was run down or unreliable. She had made a concerted effort to follow my guidelines for maintenance and repairs for at least 14 of those 16 years (the first two years were spent at the dealer). She was still attached to the car but in her words "it was time". People want new things now and then, but she had owned the car in the classic sense; you pay good money for a well engineered car, you maintain it and it outlasts 3 other cars. By today's standards that might seem old fashioned, but in the real world if you run the numbers, it still makes the most economic sense. It's not easy, however. It requires planning, patience, understanding, and yes, sometimes being inconvenienced.

This brings us to the reason for this article and what I believe is by contrast BMW's single most important idea behind ownership of a new BMW.

For years, BMW was maligned for building a car that was claimed to be high maintenance. Well, rightfully or not, the new regime took it to heart and has turned 180 degrees. The idea to extend the service requirements to the point that you take the car in as little as possible is a departure from the normal BMW philosophy. A trouble-free, no hassle, pleasant ownership experience for the first several years is what they are after here. The question is: At what price? Although car advertisers, not just BMW, would like you to believe cars should be reliable like an appliance, it just isn't so! Strap your computerized refrigerator in the bed of a pickup and drive around on Houston roads for a month in our wonderful climate conditions and then tell me it still works. Let's face it, if someone tells you long enough that the car you're thinking of buying doesn't need anything done to it for 100,000 miles, sooner or later you are going to buy into it. The low or no maintenance angle sells cars, it's the latest truth in advertising.

The lady with the 5 series could not fathom the idea that her salesperson said the new car would not need service for "at least 20,000 to 30,000 miles". When she called me with this claim my answer to her was "that depends". Without hesitation I told her it depended on how long she was planning on owning the car. If you follow what BMW would like you to do and trade in your car every 3-4 years, then my advice was to do exactly what BMW recommends. At that point the car will become someone else's problem. On the other hand, I knew her and I knew she would keep it for at least 10 years. This woman is no different than a lot of you reading this article. She will need a more accelerated schedule of maintenance, regardless of the service interval system.

It is obvious that the service recommendations on today's BMWs are written to appeal to the broader masses of people who do look at cars as appliances and buy into the idea that we live in a throw-away

These are the first time BMW buyers who have owned Fords, Toyotas, etc. As BMW expands their market grip, they have to compete on the same level of mindless ownership to survive. How you buy a \$60,000 car and consider it a throwaway after 4 years is beyond me, but I guess everything is relative. Make no mistake - this new philosophy is about selling cars to a broader range of people who are not maintaining cars for the longhaul. Anyone who expects a real return from a highly engineered, highly sensitive car, in fact, the best the automotive world has to offer, should understand the difference.

The idea of a break-in service is long gone. The reality that the basic fluid changes and critical retorques are no longer important should be suspect to everyone. It is interesting to note that the new M5 must receive a break-in service. Are all the other BMWs not deserving of this same service? Ok, I buy the factory's position that there are no break-in oils used as in the past and that the engine is run-in prior to installation but no matter how fantastic the BMW synthetic oil is (once made by Valvoline - now made by Castrol) no one will convince me that metal parts don't initially wear. Just building an engine has its share of grit that will be left in the engine and along with microscopic wear particles will cause premature wear. Case in point: I have seen an unusually high amount of problems with scoring on camshafts on new M3's - several with under 20,000 miles on the clock. Where did this grit come from and what happens if you don't get it out? You guessed it - rattling timing chains, loud lifters, and low oil pressures. What used to be a guaranteed 250,000 mile engine has a hard time making 100,000 miles. The advice I give is to change your oil with a synthetic brand in one-half of the prescribed service intervals. Do not change from one brand of oil to another, stay with one kind. (The oil that comes in the car is very good at a reasonable price.)

Additionally, the idea that standard transmissions no longer ever need fluid changes is truly alarming. I have no doubt that the "lifetime" fluid will last for the lifetime of the transmission but what will that be, half the life of a transmission that receives regular servicing or just long enough to put the car out of warranty. Pull the plug on any transmission or differential after just 2000 miles and take a hard look at the fluid in the pan with a light. You will see lots of pretty shimmering particles (brass, steel, etc.). These certainly do not add to the life of the bearings.

Automatic transmissions are the same story but with a more expensive downside. The automatic transmissions on most BMW's now also have a "lifetime fluid and never need servicing". This is either a great way to sell transmissions or lose the repeat customers who want to own these cars for the long term. Case in point: 94 740il with 78,000 miles came into the shop with a complaint of shifting problems. Now bear in mind this is a 5HP30 transmission which is definitely the most reliable unit that ZF has ever sold to BMW for use. However, the nature of an automatic is to operate under friction (i.e. fiber clutch packs) which will create heat and degrade fluid lubricating properties. As moving parts wear, they create enough aluminum and fiber powder to gunk up valve bodies until the electronic shift valves no longer function precisely as intended. This was the case of the 740il. The transmissions we work on with over 60,000 miles having no past service work are for the most part filthy and in need of basic flushing and filter changes. However, in addition, these transmissions also have a nasty little problem with plastic check balls that shrink and deform due to heat and pressure. When this happens it will cause all kinds of shifting abnormalities or worse. Don't tell me these transmissions don't need servicing or I'll be telling you "well, you have just reached the life of your transmission; that will be \$4,500."

Power steering systems are regularly neglected, especially since BMW makes no provision for routine service. Take the top off any two year old M3 power steering reservoir and instead of nice red ATF (Dextron III) you will see burnt brown fluid. By the 3rd year it will have a grayish tinge to it from all the aluminum powder. By the 4th and 5th years you will develop an occasional cavitation sound from

rack leak from a side seal or at the very least, worn internal rack bushings.

Coolant and hydraulic changes have also been pushed back which makes no sense given the fact that they are such cheap insurance. Brake fluid is hygroscopic meaning that it readily absorbs moisture when exposed to air. The system does breathe through the reservoir cap. Moisture lowers the boiling point of the fluid and can cause brake fade. It has been estimated that in Houston, two year old brake fluid will contain anywhere from 4% to 8% water. This small amount will lower the boiling point by more than 25% to 30% which could cause compromised stopping power when it is needed most. In addition, moisture in the system can cause corrosion in the bores of system components, eventually leading to premature seal wear (i.e. leaking calipers, master cylinders, etc). Most of the ABS related failures that I have encountered can be traced to moisture contamination which leads to corrosion that can make the ABS valves stick. This usually requires expensive repairs that could have been avoided by periodic flushing. Houston has more moisture in the atmosphere than do most places in the country. Because of this, I recommend brake fluid be tested for moisture content at least once a year. Flushing may be wise to do on a yearly basis, especially if the car is exposed to severe driving conditions (i.e. constant freeway stop and go, or track events/auto-crossing).

I also see cars at 40,000 plus miles that according to the service interval system are now due for an Inspection II. Obviously the air and fuel filters are changed as part of this service. However, by this time the air filter is so filthy you can literally bang a small pile of sand and grit out of it. Air and fuel filters are not worth the risk of leaving on the car for this kind of mileage.

Someone on the other side of this might say I'm cynical, maybe because the low maintenance cars mean I will have less to work on. Quite the opposite is true and to this I say: Go ahead and follow the factory maintenance schedule to the letter because the less you do the more the car will eventually break. I am seeing more work, especially large jobs like transmissions and engines than ever before because of the lack of preventative maintenance. My advice is own a car like you're going to have it for a long time. If you're looking at buying a car just off lease, check it out carefully. Have every used car checked out even if it is a "certified" car. Remember, "maintained at the dealer" doesn't necessarily mean what it used to. If you think oil changes at the nearest quick lube shop is maintaining your car, think again. Well intentioned but untrained oil jockeys will guarantee you a false sense of security.

Do not misunderstand my aversion for this lack of reasonable servicing. The technology that has enabled some of this is wonderful. Cars are definitely more reliable and with the advent of 4th and 5th generation electronics BMW's are easier to repair and infinitely safer to drive. Self-adaptive, self-learning engine management systems with multi-plexing and digital feeds are a good thing. Technology has its rewards but we have to be smart about the reality of what we expect from our BMW's. It is a shame when BMW engineers a car to last 300,000 miles and then puts it on a service program that gives one the impression they are only concerned about the warranty period. It is up to you to protect your investment because the alternative is too expensive. As for the lady, she has an appointment for a 1200 mile break-in service next month.