

## A dirty business, and someone has to clean it up

October 24, 2007



"There's no such thing as a green mechanic," says Paul Manitsas, of King Street Autos. "Cars are among the worst polluters in the world, and the industry is full of environmental hazards. It's just that some mechanics continue with really bad practices, and others are trying to improve the situation."

As the owner of a one-man mechanical workshop in busy Newtown, Manitsas does his part for the environment: "All the small things that people neglect are the things that add up."

Manitsas says that in his industry the small things add up quickly.

"Oil filters are thrown straight into the bin with oil still sitting in them. Batteries are the same - chucked into the rubbish. I can take you to 20 workshops and the bins will be full of things that shouldn't be there."

Home-grown waste disposal extends well beyond the rubbish bin. One colleague was known to roll tyres down the hill outside his workshop because he did not know what to do with them. "People are in a hurry - they don't even think about the environment. Or they don't know what to do, and how to recycle things," Manitsas says.

As a small operator, he believes there are many simple ways mechanics can improve their environmental processes, if they are willing to take a little more time. "We recycle our batteries, steel, radiators, cardboard, aluminium, tyres and oil. I reuse any oil that comes out of

cars. If it's good I put it back in. I don't charge for it, and then I don't need to take oil out of the drum.

"You can recycle oil filters because they are steel. But you can't do it quickly because they have half a litre of oil left inside, so most mechanics use the bulk of the oil and the filter goes to landfill. I drain them completely, spray a bit of degreaser, and clean them out. The oil company will take the oil away, and the containers go into the recycle bin."

Manitsas did not learn his environmentally preferable techniques from an eco-warrior, but from an old-school mechanic. "When I was doing an apprenticeship I learned from a real old mechanic, and he taught me all this stuff as a general rule. Things were expensive back in the old days. Lead in the battery was worth money. The acid could be recycled. It wasn't for the environment; it was because things were worth money."

A few years ago the industry's environmental standards caught the attention of the Motor Traders Association of NSW. It is now in the process of implementing an education program for its 6000 members.

"We want to help our members raise the bar when it comes to environmental practices," says the association's president, Steve Borg. "The green stamp program focuses on using resources more efficiently, recycling where possible and disposing of waste correctly."

The program has focused on surveying members to find out which processes leave room for improvement. "Our industry is so diverse, everyone has slightly different situations," Borg says. "A spare parts place may have asbestos products on their shelf in old stock, while mechanical workshops will have the potential to recycle oils and coolants. Others may be dealing with brake fluids, sprayers or thinners. We've been looking at the types of things members send to landfill and trying to educate them about other options."

While a voluntary audit of 25 NSW members is helping these businesses improve their environmental processes,

Borg says their long-term vision is environmental accreditation for excellent performers among the membership. "It's a long way off yet, but we're working towards it."

In the shorter term, a training course developed specifically for the motor industry is planned.

"Businesses will nominate an environment officer to come and learn methods of best practice to take back into their workplace. We hope to have this running in 12 months' time.

"Education is not going to happen overnight, but hopefully one day it will be part of everyday life in the workplace, just like recycling is at home."

At King Street Autos, Manitsas is running his own education program, in an effort to inform car owners of what they can do between services to make their car less of a hazard. He has produced a flyer titled "Your car and the environment" for customers, and says most people are unaware of the simple ways to make their car run more efficiently.

"Having tyres inflated to maximum recommended pressure can improve fuel consumption by 6 per cent - even more if you increase it a further 3 to 5 psi. I get cars coming in with 15 psi tyres all the time. If you change the oil and pump up the tyres the car is always more efficient."

But it is idling engines that are Manitsas's pet eco-peeve.

"Mechanics love to rev engines; it's not necessary most of the time. Neither is idling a car, which people do so they can sit in air-conditioning. When people deliver parts here I tell them to switch their engines off. If we switched off engines while parked there would be tonnes of emissions saved. Roadside services are one of culprits who continually idle their cars - I've rung them up to complain, but they just think I'm mad."

*This story was found at:*

*<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/10/23/1192941065129.html>*