



MARKETING EXECUTIVES  
COUNCIL

# Special Report Special Report Special Report Special Report

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## Independent Repair Industry:

*Focus Group Findings on  
Buying Influences of Repair Professionals*

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**Automotive Aftermarket Suppliers Association**

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Buying Influences of the Independent Repair Industry**

The Marketing Executives Council (MEC) of the Automotive Aftermarket Suppliers Association (AASA) has embarked on an ambitious project to raise industry awareness of the critical value that AASA Full Service Suppliers add to the product procurement process – value and quality assurance that low cost alternative sources cannot provide.

The first step in the process was to interview the aftermarket’s “front line” – the technicians and owners of independent repair facilities – and understand their perceptions and opinions of aftermarket parts and products manufactured.

This AASA MEC “Special Report” is a summary of the findings of those focus groups. The goal in sharing the opinions and concerns of repair professionals with the entire automotive aftermarket is to improve industry communication and to take the first important steps toward establishing the valuable contributions of AASA Full Service Suppliers in the minds of all supply channel partners and the consumer.

### **AASA MEC Focus Group Discussions**

Earlier this year, the MEC commissioned an independent third party to conduct six focus groups in Raleigh, NC, Chicago, IL, and Los Angeles, CA with two in each city. Invitations were issued to shop owners, technicians and/or service advisors at independent garages. Nearly 60 repair professionals participated in the focus sessions.

The focus group facilitators and participants discussed the following topics:

- Participants’ understanding of a product’s country of origin (where a product is made).
- Participants’ level of concern regarding the product producers.
- Participants’ level of concern regarding aftermarket product quality.
- Participants’ level of loyalty to North American brands.
- Factors that influence participants when making a brand purchasing decision (e.g., availability, brand name, price, etc.).
- Participants’ understanding of “OE quality” and the importance they place on this quality.
- Participants’ opinions on the importance and value of offering a breadth of product coverage.
- How often participants’ suppliers recommend a generic or off-brand product as opposed to a premium or name-brand product.
- How often participants use a generic or off-brand product in place of a premium or name-brand replacement part.
- Whether participants believe there are specific parts or systems for which generic or off-brand replacements are acceptable in place of a brand-name or premium part.
- The decision-making process participants use when choosing a source for parts (OE dealer, aftermarket sources or other sources).
- Participants’ opinions on the consumers’ view of brand names and product quality versus price and country of origin.
- To what degree participants appreciate value-added services provided by manufacturers.
- To what degree value-added services influence participants’ buying decisions.
- Participants’ level of loyalty to manufacturers who provide value-added services.

### Focus Group Composition

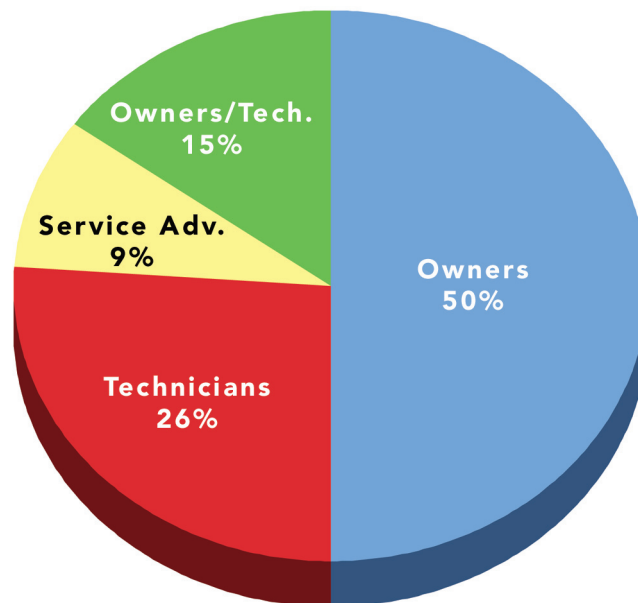
In order to participate in the AASA MEC focus groups, participants had to meet the following criteria:

- Be the decision maker on the brand of parts that are ordered in the shop for a vehicle being serviced at any given time
- Have at least five years of auto service experience
- Own/work at a shop with at least three service bays
- Own/work at a shop which maintains a minimum of 50 percent of its purchases from aftermarket sources (rather than from OE dealerships)
- Own/work at a shop where the work volume is more than 50 percent services other than oil changes and tire replacements
- Own/work at a shop which services all-make, all-model vehicles (rather than an import specialist)

Focus group participants included owners, owners/technicians, technicians and service advisors.

### Focus Group Mix

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Here is the summary of what the AASA MEC focus group participants thought about these key issues:

### **Quality of Aftermarket Parts Has Significantly Improved**

When asked about the quality of aftermarket parts over the past five years, there was clear consensus in all the focus groups that it has improved. Almost unanimously, participants said they do not worry about the quality of parts like they did five to 10 years ago.

### **Brand Comes Before Country of Origin**

The majority of participants said that they put brand before country of origin, noting that they trust the manufacturer's decision on where the product is made. Many look where the part is manufactured and would prefer a "made in the USA," but it doesn't sway their purchasing decisions. The groups agreed that it does not matter where a product is made, what is important is who stands behind it.

### **House Brands Sell on Price and on Price Alone**

The service shops know that the "house" or generic brands only sell on price and cannot sell on quality. In fact, the salespeople generally can't answer questions about the product. Participants said several times that they think the house brand is a reboxed generic brand. The exception is the premium house brands which they trust from a few of the major national distributors.

### **No One Claims They Buy Generic Brands**

Maybe it is good news or maybe some participants just didn't want to admit it publicly, but none of the focus group participants admitted buying generic brands. The exception was if no other part was available and in cases where the part was not safety related. Those in the focus groups who said they had tried generic brands also commented that they quickly switched back to the dependability of name brand products.

### **OE Quality is Important**

Original equipment (OE) quality is a very important selling point to the independent service community. However, there will be a backlash against products which are marketed as OE quality that are not. The participants said that OE quality products allow them to sell with confidence – and at a higher price.

### **Form-Fit-Function – Everything Else is Secondary**

Form, fit and function, also associated as quality, is the primary factor when making a purchasing decision, according to the focus group participants. Everything else comes second. Speed of delivery and availability comes next followed by previous experience with the brand.

### **Print Catalogs Are Obsolete – Online Catalogs Are a Must**

With the exception of filters and batteries, print catalogs are obsolete. But online catalogs – with illustrations – have become a necessity. Industry formats and standards are not important to the service community, accuracy of the data is.



### **Full-Line Offerings: Not That Important**

Providing “full-line” offerings are not that important to the service community. In fact, many participants didn’t understand full line versus short-line. However, they said they do want the manufacturers to offer coverage for the popular applications.

### **Two-year/24,000-mile Warranties Are Here in Many Shops**

Many of the shops participating in the focus groups already offer two-year, 24,000-mile warranties and expect their supplier partners to support them with extended warranties.

### **To Train or Not to Train**

Participant responses on training from manufacturers were all over the board. They ranged from “We don’t need it” to “We can never get enough of it.” Other sources of training mentioned were the Internet, third party and OE training (generally only available to those employed by dealerships).

### **Marketing Programs Are Not Respected**

Many of the participants said they just don’t have time for marketing programs such as contests and rebates any more. They want a quality product first and foremost – marketing programs won’t change that.

### **Essential Services Do NOT Increase Technician Loyalty**

Essential services were defined as field sales support, training programs, technical services such as toll free hotlines, cataloging and so forth. Overall, participants said that they were not more loyal to manufacturers who offered essential services.



More details on the AASA MEC Focus Group comments are contained in the following section. The Conclusion and the AASA MEC “Industry Call to Action” begin on page 19.



## FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

### What Does the Part's Country of Origin Mean to You?

The focus group began with a discussion of parts' country of origin. Participants addressed the following questions:

- What does the country of origin mean to you?
- Do you understand where the products that you install are manufactured?
- Does it matter to you where the products that you install are manufactured?
- Can you tell a difference between products that are made in North America versus those that are not made in North America?

The vast majority of participants (about two thirds) claimed to know where the products they use are manufactured but do not care where they are manufactured. About three quarters of the participants reported that they ask where the product is made if they haven't heard of the brand.

About a third of the participants said they prefer to buy parts made by North American manufacturers if possible, but admitted they wouldn't go out of their way to ask where the products are manufactured. Participants understood that products are made all over the world today. As a few commented, "If cars are made all over the world, why does it matter where the parts are made?"

Participants in all groups said a number of times, "Brand comes before country of origin," and that they trust the manufacturer. They said it does not matter where a product is made, what is important is who stands behinds it.

In terms of performance, it was nearly a unanimous "no" that they couldn't tell a difference between countries of origin. The exceptions were those products that didn't fit correctly and had to be modified. Examples included fittings in the wrong place and bushings that had to be shaved down.

### Are You Concerned over the Quality of Aftermarket Products?

The focus groups next addressed the quality of aftermarket parts and the quality of aftermarket versus original equipment (OE) parts, centered on the following questions

- Are you concerned over the quality of aftermarket products? If so, how much are you concerned?
- Are you more concerned now with parts quality than you have been in the past? Why or why not?

### Aftermarket Parts Quality

Only one person in all of the AASA MEC focus groups said that they had an issue with the quality of today's aftermarket parts. The rest of the participants in each group commented that aftermarket parts' quality has improved over the past 10 years.

Several shop owners commented that they are more concerned about how the parts are being installed and proper diagnosis rather than the part failing. Several noted that when it comes to quality, it comes down who will stand behind their parts.

## **OE Versus Aftermarket**

The topic of OE versus aftermarket part quality generated a great deal of discussion in each focus group.

About a quarter of the participants said the term “OE” has been overused in marketing by some aftermarket manufacturers and many products are in fact not OE quality. However, the remaining participants said that OE quality products are important to them – and, more important, to their consumers.

These participants said that an OE part allows them to sell “confidence” and, at times, a higher priced service to their customers. For example, putting “OE water pump” on the invoice allows them to sell at a higher price versus a remanufactured or an aftermarket water pump designation. However, all too often the higher price is not acceptable, which increases the importance of OE quality aftermarket parts.

About a third of the participants noted that they consider the OE product as setting the standard in the industry. As one explained it, “Would you buy Shasta or Coca-Cola?” This group of participants expressed the belief that OE parts manufacturers do all the research and engineering, and that aftermarket makers do not although not always the case.

Approximately two-thirds of the participants said they only buy from OE dealers when they have no other choice. Products mentioned included electronics, emissions-related, catalytic converters (certain applications), specific products for specific vehicle applications, and parts they couldn’t get from their normal aftermarket sources.

However, the remaining third preferred OE parts even though they didn’t necessarily purchase the majority of their parts from the OE dealer due to the higher costs.

A few respondents stated that they believe there is some “re-boxing” going on in the aftermarket and dealers. They also noticed that the pricing is different across the board for the same products in different boxes.

It was noted by some of the participants that the dealer prices have dropped significantly to them in an effort to gain the independent repair shop’s business – in some instances, lower than their normal distributors/suppliers. A few participants also noted that the warranty they get from the dealer is sometimes longer than what they receive from their aftermarket source. However, the majority still purchase aftermarket products as they offer the best value in quality and price.

### **How often do you use a “generic or off brand” product in place of a premium or name-brand replacement part?**

Product brands generated a great deal of discussion in all the focus groups. The following questions were addressed:

- How often do you use a “generic or off brand” product in place of a premium or name-brand replacement part?
- Are there certain applications where an off brand or generic brand is okay to use versus a name brand part?

- How often does your parts supplier provide a recommendation for a “generic or off brand” product versus a premium brand product?
- Is it important to you that a manufacturer be a full-line manufacturer of products rather than just manufacturing a few applications in a given product line?
- Do you think the consumer cares about brand name parts that are installed on their vehicles?  
If not, why not?
- When do you call your OE dealer for a part versus calling your traditional aftermarket supplier for a part? Why?
- Are there specific parts where you call a dealer versus an aftermarket supplier?
- Speaking of the OE dealer, what do you think makes you a better choice for the consumer than going to the OE dealer?

The answers from the focus groups have been divided in these sub-headings:

- Off-Brand/Generic Brands
- House Brands
- Consumer Brand Preferences
- Defining Quality
- The Attributes of a Good Manufacturer

### **Off-Brand/Generic Brands**

Nearly all participants claim they do not use any off-brand or generic parts. A few participants noted, it would be “suicide to use the parts,” or “Why would you put your reputation on the line? They (the customers) look at your shop – not the parts house.”

Nearly all the participants claimed that they could tell the difference between some generic parts and brand name parts just by looking at them, such as brake pads. Some admitted it was more difficult to differentiate on parts such as filters or alternators because the real difference is inside the product.

A couple admitted they had used generic parts in the past when nothing else was available or if it was a “minor” part. These focus group participants were adamant that they would never use them for safety-related components (e.g. brake components).

When asked if there were ever any applications where generic parts would be acceptable, most of the participants responded with an emphatic “no.”

A few participants stated that they may test a part out on their vehicles first to see how it performs. If its performance is satisfactory, only then would they consider selling it to their customers. Rotors were mentioned by two participants as a generic branded product that had been used. Both noted that they tested them prior to installing them on customer vehicles.

One participant said that if he were to use a generic part, he would ask the consumer first for his approval. That was met with a chorus of disapproval from the others in that focus group. All said if the customer had to be warned, then it showed the repair professional didn’t have enough trust in the product to install it in the first place.

## House Brands

It was understood by the vast majority of participants that the house brands are generic parts in the distributor's box – and these participants couldn't tell a difference in quality or performance between generic or house brands. Most of the participants said they would not use these parts or that they have had problems with them.

A couple people complained that the house brands were billing themselves as "OE" quality when in fact they were not in quality or appearance.

About half of the participants who answered this question noted that their distributor salespeople sold on price alone. While the participants noted that they can make more profit by using the product, they added that the salesman isn't the one facing the consumer.

About half of the participants noted that they have noticed quality problems with house brands especially when it comes to brake products. Squealing and other noise issues were the number one complaint.

A few participants noted that, while the house brands and generics may save money in parts, they may cost more in labor.

However, almost all participants said that house brands from a few major distribution chains are in fact supplied by premium manufacturers. Few have had problems with these premium house brands and find them a good value.

## Consumer Brand Preferences

The focus groups were unanimous: consumers rarely ask for a particular brand. The only exceptions mentioned were for motor oil, tires and batteries.

The basic response pattern was "Consumers don't care; they trust us with their cars and the parts we put on their cars."

Consumers with older vehicles virtually always claim they are not going to keep their vehicle long and are looking for the cheapest repair, according to participants. The shops in the less affluent neighborhoods will abide by the consumer's request while those in the mid-income to more affluent neighborhoods will not skimp on the repair or use generic parts.

A couple of participants said that they will offer a labor warranty but not a parts warranty if they do not select the name brand or OE part. These participants noted that the consumer generally selects the name brand/OE part in these cases.

A couple of responses also included that it is sometimes better to lose the job than put a cheap part on the vehicle and run the risk of having an angry customer.

### **The Definition of Quality**

Participants were asked to define quality in one sentence. Responses included:

- Form/fit/function – everything else is secondary.
- A part that never comes back.
- A part that outlasts the original part.
- A part that outlasts the warranty.
- A part that lasts for a reasonable amount of time.
- A part that fits correctly and doesn't require any tweaks or modifications by my technicians.
- A part that is as good as or better than the OE part.
- A part that lasts five years, not one or two months.
- Fit and finish the same as the part that was replaced on the vehicle.
- A part that performs the way it is claimed to perform and beyond – not just 12,000 miles.
- A part that doesn't take any longer to install than an OE part should take to install.

### **The Attributes of a Good Manufacturer**

Participants were asked describe the attributes of a good manufacturer. Responses were:

- A company with a good track record.
- A company that stands behind their product.
- A company that understands our business.
- A company that has good distribution, fair pricing and excellent quality.
- A company that is committed to our industry.
- A company that isn't relying on its past successes.
- A company that doesn't make excuses.
- A company that tells the truth.
- A company that is responsive and returns phone calls.
- A company with good manufacturing processes.
- A company that will work with me to find out where problems are and the root causes.
- A company that does not think about its own profit margins first and foremost.

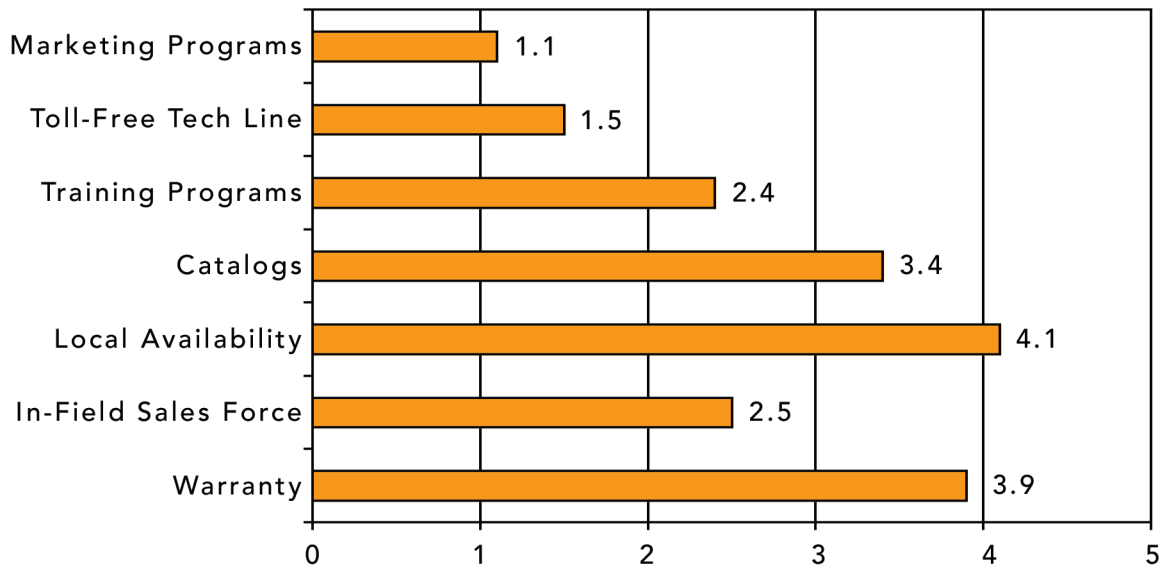
### **How Important Is It to You that A Manufacturer Has Value-Added Programs?**

The focus group discussions of the value-added programs offered by full-line manufacturers yielded surprising responses.

Participants were asked to rate how important the following value-added programs or essential services are when selecting a particular part on a 1-5 scale, with 1 being low and 5 being high:

- Marketing programs such as spiff programs or rebates
- Toll free technical service hotlines
- Training programs
- Printed and online catalogs that comply with industry accepted standards and formats
- Local availability and widespread distribution
- In-field sales force
- Product warranties

## Importance of Value-Added Programs



### Importance of Manufacturer's Warranty

- A warranty is seen as a “given” by most of the participants. Participants rated warranties low because they figured if there was a problem with a part that the manufacturer would stand behind the part – so it wouldn’t be a factor in the purchasing decision.
- “Lifetime warranties” on the other hand are seen as a joke (“It means that we will be fixing them for a lifetime” was said by more than one participant).
- It was suggested that manufacturers should improve on resolving their warranty claims faster than they are currently doing. Many see the process as a hassle and simply want a new part. Some focus group participants complained that finding the original receipt is difficult because they are buried in storage boxes, possibly off-site.
- Many shops, especially those in Los Angeles, are offering two years, 24,000-mile warranties and expect their manufacturer partners to stand behind them if the part is at fault within that timeframe.

### Catalogs

- A vast majority of participants said they no longer use printed catalogs with the exception of occasional look-up of filters or batteries.
- Those who use the online catalogs said they were user-friendly and assumed they are updated regularly.
- Those who use the online catalogs also prefer all parts have an illustration with the part/part number.
- A few people said they still used printed catalogs. One described himself as “old school” and the few others were relatively older in age.
- No participant mentioned it was important that the catalog complied with industry-accepted guidelines and formats, even after some probing.

- A few participants mentioned that their manufacturer's sales representative had installed the catalog on their computer during a visit to their shop and taught them how to use the system.

**NOTE:** It is important to mention that most focus group participants do not perform catalog parts look up but rather depend on their suppliers (which is not the manufacturer). While they were very familiar with electronic catalogs, most were unaware of the role the manufacturer plays in providing the application data that populates these e-catalog providers.

### **Toll Free Tech Lines**

- Not very many participants used the manufacturer's toll free tech lines.
- A common complaint from the Los Angeles groups was that many toll free lines are not open during West Coast hours.
- Several participants noted that they go online for support rather than picking up the phone.
- Those who do use the toll free tech lines generally had no problems with the service or results, but noted that they didn't use them a lot.

**NOTE:** Although it really didn't fit this topic, the Chicago participants discussed ways to bring in technicians as part of the solution on technical issues. Participants believed that manufacturers have enough feedback from shop owners and need to engage more with technicians.

### **Local Availability/Widespread Coverage**

The overriding response to the importance of a manufacturer having local availability and widespread coverage was two-fold:

- Product availability is the name of the game, according to most of the participants. If the part is not available, the focus group participants said they will choose another brand in most cases. About a third said that they would determine if the customer was in a rush for the vehicle before making that decision.
- Widespread coverage was not as important. After probing the participants, the vast majority were not as concerned if the manufacturer was a "full-line" manufacturer of the parts. Some responses included "it would be nice to know that they carried the most popular applications and if they weren't spotty in their coverage," but overall it was not important.

### **Marketing Programs/Rebates**

This "value-added program" scored the lowest out of all the programs discussed.

Participants noted that they did not have enough time to fill out all the paperwork, read the rules, send in end flaps, etc. They also complained there were too many contests going on at any one time.

Many participants said that instead of providing rebates or marketing programs, they would prefer lower prices, even for a limited amount time.

One point-of-purchase item that was favorably discussed in Chicago and Los Angeles was cutaways or counter items that educate the consumer why the repair has to be done (e.g. filter cutaways, good shock vs. leaky shock, good anti-freeze vs. old anti-freeze, etc.). They noted these items are kept "forever" and can help complete the sale.

The few shop owners who saw rebates as favorable noted that it was nice “every now and then to bring in pizza for the guys in the back.” Another response was, “I don’t need a manufacturer to take me on a trip that I can go on whenever I want.”

### **Field Sales Representatives**

A few of the participants said that they appreciated the visits by the sales representatives. These were generally the smaller shops that felt appreciated by the visit and noted that it made it easy to provide feedback.

Several said that the best reps are those who can answer technical questions about the product and are able to talk one-on-one with the technician.

The majority of people who answered this question said that if they are visited by a representative, they want to know that it is someone “who can actually make a difference.” Numerous participants noted that they have expressed issues with the reps but their feedback never went any further.

More than half of the participants said they had no use for the visits at all and that the reps either got in the way or never came with anything valuable. A couple of participants noted that the exceptions to the rule were salespeople who would come to teach them something – these were seen as valuable visits.

However, nearly all of the participants said that sales rep visits would be valuable if they could address a problem that needed resolution. This would be seen as a value-added service.

Shop owners and technicians alike said that they are too busy to spend time with the reps unless they could provide significant value. Across all the groups, it was agreed that the worst time for a sales rep to visit is late in the day.

### **Training Programs**

This subject drew a very broad range of responses – everything from “We don’t need manufacturers to provide any training” to “we can’t get enough from manufacturers.”

- The No. 1 complaint was that the manufacturer’s training was seen as too commercial.
- In Chicago, most participants said there is a wealth of third-party trainers, so manufacturer training is not needed. However, it would be viewed positively if manufacturers could fill gaps in training courses. Several participants noted that manufacturers are viewed as the ones who put engineering and research behind the products and are more credible than many of the other sources – as long as the training doesn’t come off as too commercial.
- Some participants suggested the training from manufacturers can be most beneficial if focused on the latest technologies. More routine tasks, such as replacing a brake shoe, can be taught internally by a more experienced technician.
- Another common complaint was that the training was too advanced for entry-level technicians and not advanced enough for experienced technicians.
- Only a handful of participants said they use online training programs.
- A pet peeve was instructors who read out of a book.

- A common lament at all the focus groups was training that “tries to teach us how to sell more products.” Instead, several participants said it would be a win-win if the focus instead was how to reduce comebacks.

Note: Overall, the focus group findings were not conclusive enough to arrive at any conclusions about training. It would appear that the manufacturers do have a role in training if they can fill the voids not being provided by associations and third-party trainers or which can be done by the shops internally. It was obvious that the majority of the shops will invest in the time and resources to send their technicians to training that they see worthwhile.

### **Loyalty to Manufacturers Who Provide Value-Added Programs/Services**

The focus group facilitators asked if the participants felt more loyal to the manufacturers who provided value-added programs and essential services. Essential services were defined as field sales support, training programs, technical services such as toll free hotlines, cataloging and so forth.

- The majority of the participants didn't have a strong feeling on this topic, which can be taken to say that they are not more loyal to those manufacturers who offer value-added programs and services.
- About a third of the participants said they were more loyal, especially immediately after training sessions, but that loyalty ultimately reverted to brands that participants had used in the past with success and had come to trust. They noted that value-added programs and services weren't going to change their opinions unless the trusted brand/product slipped in quality.
- About half of the participants responding to the question said that loyalty comes from a quality product. They said that creating relationships and understanding their business is important. The programs come after that.
- When asked if the industry would be adversely affected if many of the value-added programs and services were discontinued, the majority of participants in each focus group remained silent. Those who did speak didn't think it would hurt the industry much. Several mentioned that if these programs and services stopped, prices might be lowered.

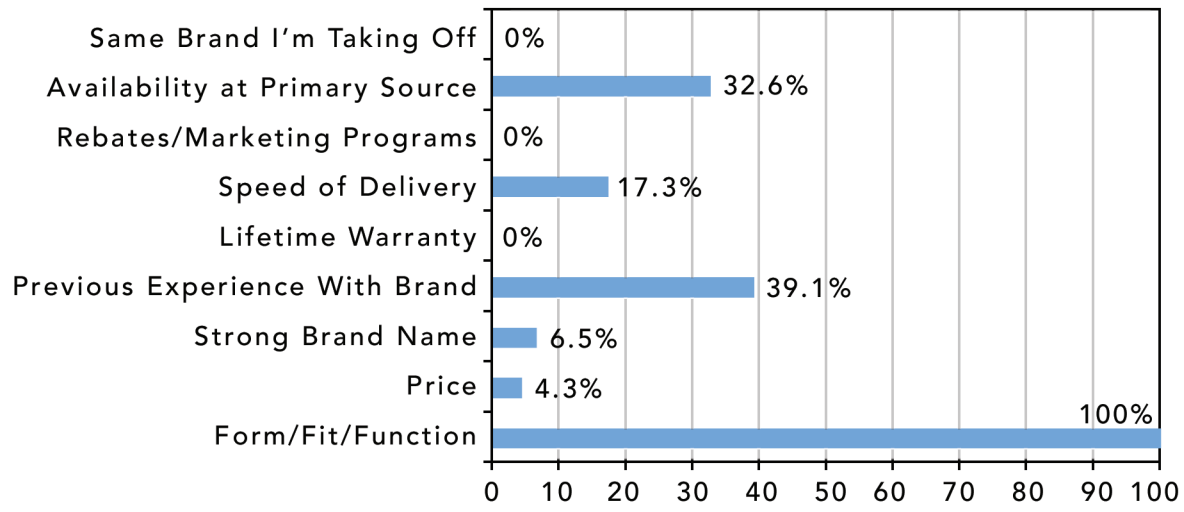
### **How Do You Make the Decision on What Product to Purchase from Your Parts Supplier?**

The focus group participants were asked for the top two points considered when choosing on a part based on these factors:

- Form/fit/function
- Quality
- Price
- Strong brand name
- Lifetime warranty
- Availability at your primary source
- Rebates/marketing programs

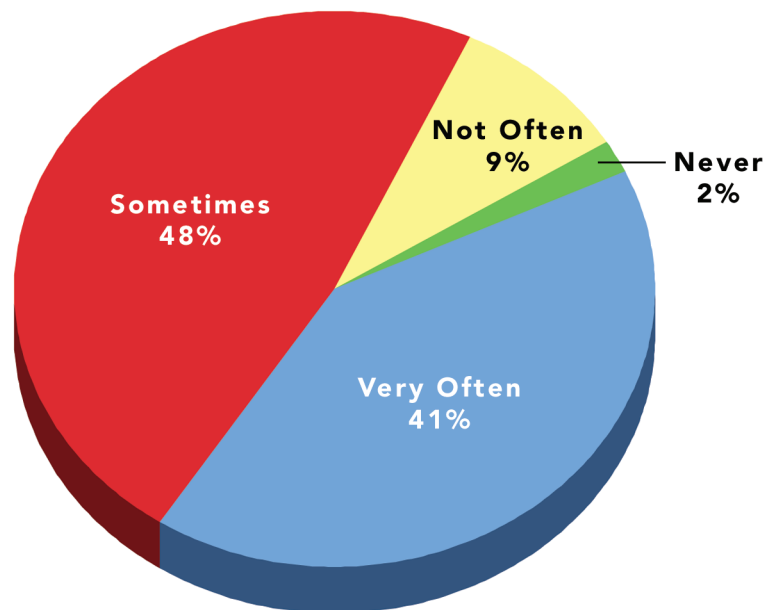
The factors were presented to participants in no particular order but form/fit/function (which was associated with quality) was the first factor mentioned in each focus group. Previous experience with brand was popular in Raleigh; speed of delivery and availability at primary source were split evenly in Chicago and Los Angeles.

## Purchasing Decision Factors



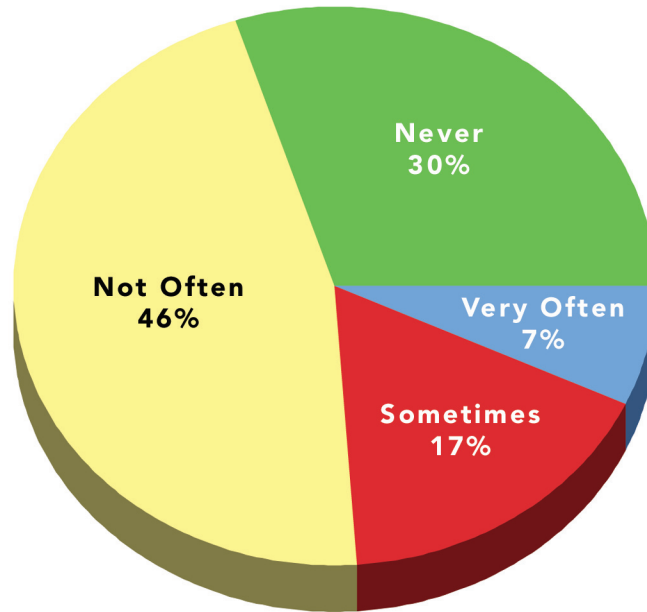
No participant said they ever purchase a brand because it was the exact brand taken off the vehicle, due to a lifetime warranty or because of a marketing program or rebate.

## When you are placing an order for a particular part, how often do you ask for a specific name brand?



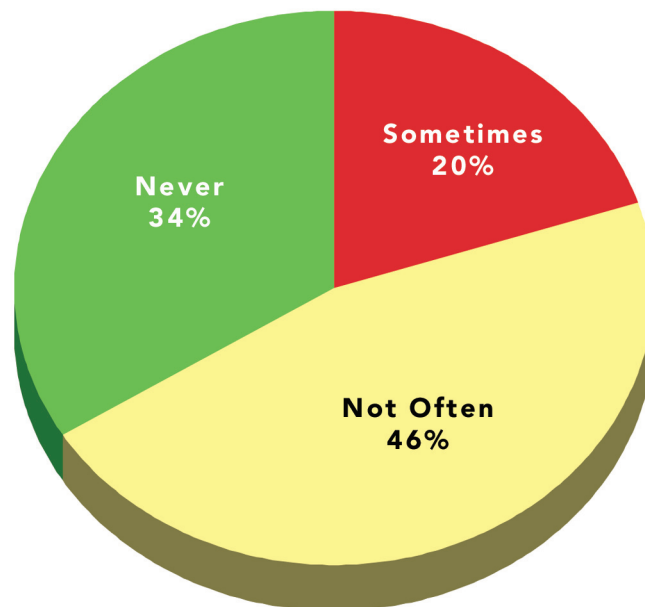
**When placing an order for a particular part, how often do you purchase a brand recommended by your supplier?**

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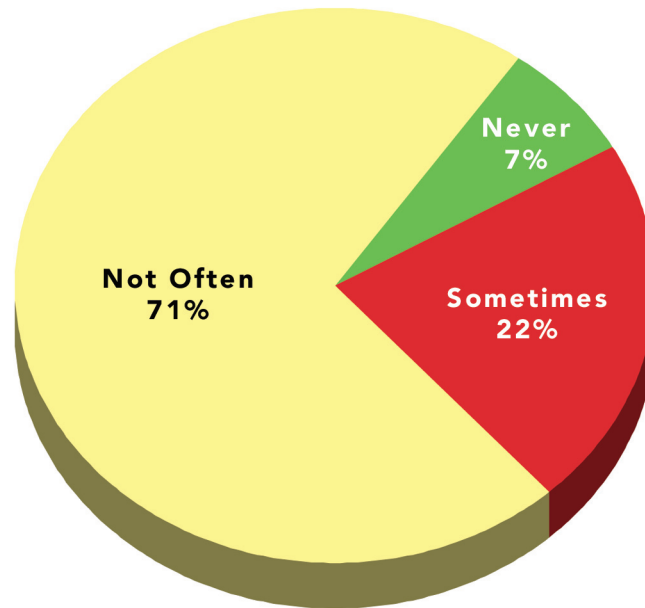
**When you are placing an order for a particular part, how often do you choose the least expensive part?**

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**When you are placing an order for a particular part, how often do you specify the same brand that you removed?**

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The vast majority of participants purchased their products through an independent jobber, warehouse distributor or affiliated program group. Very few purchased through a retailer and, if they did, it was because they had to. Everyone purchased some products through a dealer, but it was not their first call in most cases.



## CONCLUSION

The results of the AASA Marketing Executives Council focus study research reveals: most repair professionals put quality above price and refuse to put their reputation at risk by installing inferior quality parts. However, the shop owners and technicians that take the time and care enough to participate in surveys and focus groups generally tend to be those already adhering to best practices. The reality is that a large population still buys and installs generic, low-cost and possibly inferior products.

### **Do Not Let the Actions of Some Effect the Reputation of Many**

As one AASA MEC focus group participant observed, being a great technician does not necessarily translate to being an expert in product quality, nor does it guarantee the skills to become a successful business manager. Almost everyone participating in the focus groups had a story about a shop down the road or in the same town that only sells on low price. As good business people and concerned channel partners, participants were concerned that these shops were not only “bad for business” but bad for the independent aftermarket in general.

Unfortunately, when a vehicle owner has a bad experience with an independent repair facility, all too often they lose trust in the entire aftermarket. Car owners turn instead to the OE dealer for service and many come to view dealers as the only reliable source for parts, repair and maintenance.

When this occurs, everyone in the aftermarket supply chain – from the manufacturer to the repair facility and all the steps in between – suffer.


### **Industry-wide Concern**

Several years ago, a major retail service chain was found guilty of deceptive practices – performing unnecessary repairs on customer vehicles at one particular shop in the chain. The publicity surrounding that lawsuit not only had a devastating impact on that retailer but had ripple effects throughout the entire independent aftermarket repair community. Many vehicle owners lost trust in independent repair shops to give an honest assessment of repairs. It almost caused the retail chain to withdraw completely from the automotive business. However, with the passage of time – and significant dollars spent on public relations – this event was forgotten and the retail chain prevailed.

As this example shows, the actions of one shop in a chain of hundreds nearly brought down a significant player in the industry and tarnished the entire industry’s image for a period of time. The factors potentially are in place for this to happen again – only this time in the area of product quality. The entire industry must recognize the problem and take action now.

### **Call to Action**

If left unchecked, the use of low-cost, poor quality auto parts could have a devastating impact on the entire independent automotive aftermarket. Many repair professionals are unaware that the parts they install may have been substituted by their distribution partners. Very few auto parts are protected by federally mandated regulations on quality or safety. The phrase, “Buyer Beware,” has never been a more appropriate term than when it comes to these inferior auto parts.



Major safety components such as brake friction, chassis parts and attaching hardware – just to name a few – are prevalent among the knock-off product offerings which are not subject to regulation. The lure of low price and higher profit margins are too hard to resist by some repair shops – yet the use of these parts may result in serious injuries or deaths.

The time is now for everyone working in the supply chain – suppliers, distributors, retailers, jobbers and repair professionals – to protect the integrity of the independent automotive aftermarket. The first step is to ask this question – “Do I know how, where and to what quality standards this product was made?” – before selling or installing a low-cost automotive component. Unless you have a fully staffed quality assurance lab and test equipment, not just a “go, no go” inspection, most likely the answer is “no.” The essential services supporting the product are another important consideration. Does the parts supplier stand behind the product with warranties, training programs and an in-field sales force? Does the supplier offer toll free technical support, printed and online catalogs, local availability and widespread distribution? Again, if the product did not come from a full service supplier, the answers are all likely to be no. The best assurance of product quality and integrity including support before, during and after the sale are trusted, full service suppliers.

Education is needed throughout the channel all the way down to the vehicle owner. This educational effort is the responsibility of everyone in the industry regardless of position in the supply chain.

Unless we stand together as an industry, the actions of some will damage the reputation and livelihood of all – perhaps irrevocably.



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### **About the AASA Marketing Executives Council**

The AASA Marketing Executives Council (MEC) is a forum for aftermarket supplier marketing executives to collaborate in helping improve the state and image of the North American manufacturer base. For more information, contact Jack Cameron, 919-406-8856 or [jcameron@mema.org](mailto:jcameron@mema.org).

### **About the Automotive Aftermarket Suppliers Association (AASA)**

AASA ([www.aftermarketsuppliers.org](http://www.aftermarketsuppliers.org)) exclusively serves suppliers of aftermarket components, tools and equipment, and related products. It is a recognized industry change agent – promoting a collaborative industry environment, providing a forum to address issues and serving as a valued resource for members. AASA is an affiliate association of the Motor & Equipment Manufacturers Association (MEMA). “AASA, Leadership in the Global Automotive Aftermarket”