

HOW TO NOT WRITE ESTIMATES

By Dave Luehr | 04 February 2020

It's time to get real – not that I am not always 'real' with my readers, but I need shop leaders to embrace the importance of this message! Collision customers don't need an estimate; they need their vehicles repaired properly and without a lot of fuss. The only remaining question is the best way to determine the scope of damage so that we have an accurate repair plan to work from. An estimate in the traditional sense may not be the best solution.

The word 'estimate' sends shivers up my spine because of the very inaccuracy it suggests. The word might as well be 'guess-timate.' Listen, I totally understand why so many shops feel obligated to provide a customer with an estimate so they can determine the best course of action with insurers, financial considerations, etc.

Using the word 'estimate' has also been used in order to cover the shop's butt, avoiding legal action from a customer that is unhappy with the infinite succession of supplements. Aside from these reasons... I wish the word would be banned from the collision industry vocabulary!

One way traditional estimates frequently cause trouble is when shops allow customers to drop by any time they choose. This puts the shop in an unprepared and reactive situation. The tendency for many shops in these situations is to write an estimate out in front of the building at the curb, sometimes in the rain, and do it as fast as they possibly can. Sadly, for most shops, this poor attempt at damage analysis also becomes the shop's 'plan of repair' where parts are ordered, and the vehicle eventually becomes introduced to the production flow line. And thus begins its insane comedy of supplemental errors.

A case for insisting on appointments

In a recent conversation with my friend Ryan Taylor, the innovator behind the amazing [Bodyshop Booster](#) system, he shared some data obtained from important research on the subject:

Customers are 25% more likely to show up at the shop when an appointment is made compared to no appointment!

Another interesting fact is that 60% of people who arrive at a shop without an appointment and are either turned away or induced to leave empty-handed due to estimator unavailability, will **never return**.

There is a pervasive, limiting belief still in our industry that the customer experience is somehow enhanced when we instruct them to drop by whenever they like. Research has shown that this is absolutely untrue, and, in fact, the results are quite the opposite.

It's time for shops to take back control of their schedule, become proactive and show the professionalism required to create accurate appraisals and a greater customer experience!

If the above reasons for scheduling appraisals are not compelling enough, consider the following: vehicle technology is not the same as it was in the old days when estimate writing was invented. Back in the

days of the horseless carriage, it was easy to identify one hundred percent of the damage and OEM specified repair methods were hard to come by.

These days it is impossible to accurately assess damage to what is essentially a computer on wheels without connecting to a scan tool first and then incorporating OEM repair methods into the repair plan. With that in mind, I can't think of many situations where a ten-minute curbside written estimate is going to be sufficient. To be successful in today's collision repair world, shops must schedule appraisals for at least one hour and, in some cases, much longer.

The 'Enhanced Appraisal'

This style of detailed appraisal has been around for a while in other countries including the United Kingdom where an accredited 'Vehicle Damage Assessor' (VDA) methodically assesses the damage, taking the time required to capture all the damage, even if minor, and a temporary disassembly and reassembly must be performed.

There are a handful of shops in both the U.S. and Canada that use similar systems with excellent results. But the shops that do this with excellence are certainly not letting customers drop in whenever they like!

At [Elite Body Shop Solutions](#), we call this approach to appraisal an 'Enhanced Appraisal.' We recommend starting by setting one-hour appointments with the customers. and then gathering as much up-front vehicle information as possible. This allows the shop to locate applicable repair methods in advance of the appointment.

Or... Just quit writing appraisals!

There will be many cases where, through the qualification and triage of a repair job, you determine that it really makes no sense to even attempt writing an enhanced appraisal. Perhaps there is simply too much potential for hidden damage? In these situations, and assuming the vehicle is safe to be on the road, why not just book them a repair appointment when the shop has availability and do a complete, meticulous disassembly and repair plan when it arrives?

In our country (the U.S.) parts can usually be obtained within 24 hours. So, instead of placing multiple parts orders generated from multiple supplements, just get it right one time! This is my favorite method and it really cuts down the amount of time needed up front with estimating staff. At [Elite](#) we call this method 'Express Repair' and have a word track our clients use to help explain the benefits and convenience to their body shop customers, helping them understand why an 'estimate' is not required.

Triage tips

To help a shop determine which method is best, a scheduled Enhanced Appraisal or an Express Repair with no prewritten appraisal, there are a few factors to consider.

- Is it a total loss or unwanted type of repair? Avoid it.
- Is the vehicle safe to be on the streets? If not, get it towed right away.
- Will the shop be able to write an accurate enhanced appraisal in a reasonable amount of time, or should the shop avoid writing it until a permanent and meticulous disassembly can be scheduled (Express Repair)?

- What are the insurance company DRP guidelines (if applicable)?

My favorite method for determining the scope of damages is to ask the customer to text photos of the damage to the shop. Our Elite clients love using the [Bodyshop Booster](#) app to determine the best course of action in these triage situations. This app helps the customer deliver the correct vehicle information to the shop instantly and virtually eliminates poor quality images from being sent.

Conclusion

As I stated earlier, I really want to help shops be successful in a very challenging future, and it's time to 'get real' about eliminating bad old habits, behaviors, and beliefs.

A good starting place is taking back control of the business through smarter appraisal habits. The repair plan is the foundation of the repair and old beliefs such as "we don't have time for this" or "we don't get paid for this" are not good enough excuses to avoid doing the right things.

As you have heard me say many times, "Right now is the greatest time in history to be in the body shop business; but only for those with [the right mindset!](#)" Are you willing to challenge your thinking, update your beliefs and succeed? Or do you want to stick to your old habits at your own peril?

If you want the help of an Elite Mentor to set-up an Express Repair Program in your shop, email us at [info@elitebodyshopsolutions.com!](mailto:info@elitebodyshopsolutions.com)