

OE Certifications Update 2020 / Part 1 of 2 As Seen In Autobody News

By Gay Ledoux

OE collision shop certification has been top-of-mind for the industry for the last ten years or more. The emergence and fast-advance of ADAS systems has only heightened the need for more and easy access to OE repair information, and added credence to these programs.

Some shops find value in the certification programs, stating that it gives their shop more credibility with customers as opposed to those that are not certified. Leveraging their certification with the proper promotion, some shops claim that their business has increased. Other shops decry certifications stating that they don't have "any teeth" and are a "rubber stamp" program - just a "money grab" for the OE's.

As we enter a new decade and the emergence of new automotive technology, it's time to sit back and reflect on where OE certification programs have been, and where they may be going. To do that we have enlisted several OE certified shops and two industry consultants; Mark Olson of Vehicle Collision Experts, LLC (VECO) of Seattle, WA and Ron Kuehn of Collision Business Solutions of Henderson, NV. Here's what they had to say.

Is your shop certified by any OE's? Which OE's certification programs are you a part of?

"Early-on, we joined the Assured Performance network of certifications," said Chad Eldridge of Majestic Auto Body in Idaho Falls, ID. "The process was quick and easy and the rebates were a good perk. Since then we have picked up Ford and working on two others.

Both Artistic Auto Body of Portland, OR and Fuller Auto Body of Auburn, MA went with the stable of OE's represented by Assured Performance. In addition, Fuller added Honda, Subaru and Ford. Artistic went high-line with Jaguar, Land Rover, Audi, Tesla, Maserati, Alfa Romeo, and Infinity as well as main-lines Ford, Subaru and Honda.

In the early days, selling a shop on the concept of certification could be difficult. As the concept "caught traction", some shops wanted to be certified for every make.

Why did you choose to become OE certified?

Eldridge of Majestic Auto Body explained, "We saw the concept as another way to market ourselves - to show customers we were a good quality shop. When they see our certification plaques on the wall, I think it puts their mind at ease."

"With technology rapidly changing, it was the right thing to do," said Josh Fuller of Fuller Auto Body. "It will help us repair vehicles better, it will increase our professionalism and it is an industry trend."

Terry Mostul of Artistic Auto Body noted, "Years ago, back in the 1980's when the DRP's first appeared, we knew it was the right thing to do for our business, so we jumped on it. Today, the OE certification is the next wave and we know this is the right thing to do for our times."

In the earliest days of the certification programs, many shops enrolled because they thought it was like a DRP program with a different flavor. They thought the OE was going to send their shop customers and were really disappointed when they found things didn't work quite that way. It would seem that the industry has gotten beyond that hurdle. Another reason shops wanted to join was because they saw other area shops being certified and didn't want to be left out – despite the fact that many simply didn't even qualify. By this time, the OE's have weeded those shops out of the mix. Some shops wanted to join up for no other reason than because it was "trendy." No doubt, OE certification is a trend, but that alone is not a good enough reason to be certified. Still others could see that this was the future. They chose their certifications strategically and in a business-like manner and made the right choice.

How did you happen to select those particular OE's?

"We wanted to be on the leading edge of the OE certification wave, said Chad Eldridge. "The certifications provided by Assured Performance gave us that edge."

Mostul of Artistic Auto Body noted, "We are a quality-based shop and do a lot of high-end cars so we went primarily with those certifications."

Fuller of Fuller Auto Body had a similar but slightly different perspective, "Our certifications were selected strategically. We first looked at the vehicles that were in our area, what we were repairing, and selected our certifications accordingly."

Which one or two certifications provide the most benefit to your business... and what are those benefits?

"Repair knowledge today is critical," said Chad Eldridge. "Having access to that information through the certification connection gives us an edge. It is one of the best parts of any certification."

Terry Mostul maintains that any OE program that restricts key parts only to certified shops is a plus. This gives those shops the edge over non-certified shops by limiting repair capacity.

Josh Fuller likes the Subaru program because he says, "Subaru customers are very loyal to the brand and see value in a Subaru certified shop. We also like Honda because they have a lot of commitment to the brand, to the program, and to I-CAR training. We also like Nissan because of the training they provide."

Without naming a brand, which certifications provides the least benefit?

Fuller noted that any program was good because it gave the shop a connection with the OE that the shop could promote.

Mostul said, "The programs with the least value are the rubber-stamp programs where all you need to do to qualify is send them a check every year."

Have you purchased equipment to become certified and the equipment was never used? If so, why was it not used?

"For our shops," explained Eldridge, "we have found that some of the prescribed equipment didn't work well, especially in the early days of OE certification. So rather than not perform that particular operation, we purchased a different brand of tool that worked better."

Mostul notes, "We had to buy a few dedicated jigs for our Celette equipment that we didn't use because we never saw any of those particular car models."

Josh Fuller maintains that they have used everything they purchased to meet certification standards.

However, stories abound about very expensive pieces of equipment that were purchased to meet certification demands, and were never used. Welders that were purchased, thrown in a corner because nobody knew how to use them, and later returned to the vendor, only to be purchased again, a year later, when the shop was re-inspected for its second year with the program.

Mark Olson of VECO Experts explains: "There are two reasons why we have seen this happen time after time. One is, the shop simply does not know how to use the equipment. They never took an independent class for its use, and neither the equipment manufacturer nor the distributor offered sufficient training. So, they met the OE's requirement for having the equipment, but all they really got was a check-mark in a box. The other reason this equipment is not used is because, despite having the right equipment, and maybe having someone employed at the shop who knows how to properly use it, the shop simply chooses not to follow proper OE procedures... despite being a certified shop."

Do you promote yourself as a certified shop? How is that done? What do you do?

"We are in the process of rebuilding our website," said Eldridge. "Eventually we will have all the OE certifications listed."

Artistic Auto Body has all their certifications listed on their website. Mostul says, "We also promote our certifications via social media, word-of-mouth referrals, and a reader-board along the highway."

Fuller Auto Body lists their certifications on their website. "But other than that," says Josh Fuller, "We stay pretty low-key."

"We talk about promotion quite a bit in our seminars," offered Olson. "Maybe 5 percent of certified shops are properly leveraging the certification they worked so hard for, and spent so much time, money and effort on. They did the training, bought the tools, and now they are

keeping it a secret. In my seminars I ask everyone to pull out their business card. If they are certified, even with only one OE, they need to at least state that on their business card. They need to promote it on their web site, through social media, and they need to have a good working relationship with the local dealer for that brand.”

Having a good working relationship with the local dealers for the brands you are certified in is key. Less than 40% of dealers have their own body shops and contrary to popular belief, just because a dealer has a body shop doesn't mean it is automatically certified. Surprisingly, some dealer body shops have made a conscious decision not to spend the money and effort to be certified because "... we still have plenty of cars coming through the door. Why do we need to be certified?"

Watch next month's issue of *Autobody News* for parts 2 of this 2-part series.