



If it ain't broke ...

The current recession has got a lot of us out there thinking about a lot of different things. Not only are many of us concerned with regards to our personal financial and employment future, but we are also keeping a wary eye on the general economic health of the country itself. Things may get better, or they may get worse, but no one can say for certain where exactly we are headed.

My road warrior

This situation has caused me to ponder other, more car-related subjects as well. For example, I am fortunate to own a vehicle which is paid for, and which is extremely reliable. My E34 is 18 years old, but is rust-free despite living its entire life with the salty specter of the Canadian winter looming over its sheet metal shoulders. With over 250,000 miles showing on the odometer – 400,000 kilometers, actually – the car took me and my companion to Vancouver and then down to Seattle and back to Montreal two summers ago, loaded down with camping gear and returning excellent fuel mileage the entire way. Aside from regular maintenance such as oil changes and the suspension freshening that I did when I first purchased the car, the vehicle has never let me down.



My 1991 BMW 525i

Straddling the technology divide

Now, it might seem like I am bragging here about the low cost of ownership I have enjoyed while driving my almost-classic BMW sedan. However, the reason I bring any of this up is because I feel as though the particular era of engineering which produced the E34 and by extension the E30 design has largely passed us by. My vehicle straddles the line the BMW crossed in the 1990's that firmly divided automobiles into two groups: those which could be repaired by their owners with the use of simple hand tools, and those which required expensive computer equipment owned by the dealer or dedicated garages to cure what ailed them.

After the turn of the new millennium, BMW pursued the technological advancement of their vehicles with the same intensity they applied to conquering broader and broader markets. Hand in hand with the X3 and the 6-Series came sophisticated computer control systems that had their hand in everything from vehicle stability to engine management to iDrive. This explosion of innovation transformed the BMW line-up into one which could now offer the best of both the performance and the luxury worlds, but it also came at a fairly high price. Gone are the days of shade-tree diagnostics and inexpensive phone calls to BMA or Pelican Parts. Once out of warranty, modern BMW's must be cared for by pricey technicians who are trained to operate the wide range of specialized tools necessary for their repair.

Even when nothing is ostensibly "wrong" with a vehicle, their high-tech components can still cause issues, as with the recent software modifications performed by BMW on the 135i that reduced performance and caused protest and confusion amongst frustrated owners.

Technological progress is inevitable in any domain, and BMW is far from the only car company to have loaded up their vehicles with all manner of gizmos and gadgets. My aim isn't to single out the company for comparison against other manufacturers in terms of reliability or build quality. What I am trying to do, however, is to contrast the BMW's of today with those of just a few short decades ago.

Is value still an option on new BMWs?

The recession has emphasized value when making purchasing decisions, and while my particular experience with the roundel has been positive – and inexpensive – it is hard for me to imagine a future, 15 years down the road, where someone is sitting down to write a column about how trouble-free their 2004 5-Series BMW has been for them, past the 100,000 mile mark.

There was once a time when BMW owners would have been able to recommend that a mechanically inclined friend pick up an example of the marque without

fear that the advice would come back to haunt them. It was easy to see the value of a used BMW as a solid car that would provide thousands of miles of pleasurable driving at no great cost to owners unafraid of getting a little greasy now and then. That value is no longer present in the same sense. Sadly, I could not in good conscious make a similar recommendation now when it comes to the latest generation of BMW products.

Built to sell vs Built to last

The word product is itself an excellent way to describe the transition the BMW vehicles have made. BMWs today offer great performance, amazing comfort and depending upon your point of view, unique styling. The difference between these automobiles and their predecessors is that the former were built to last, while the current are built to sell. Like so many other "products" on the modern market, there is plenty of sizzle and flash surrounding new vehicles from our venerable brand, but once the tinsel fades they are revealed to be as disposable as the previous generation flat-panel television – or hedge fund manager.

The cars streaming out of BMW's factories are impressive feats of design and possess capabilities that would shame even their recent ancestors. Will I ever trade in my E34 on one of them? Unlikely. I just can't see the value proposition in exchanging a vehicle that always starts when I turn the key for one which may one day require an extensive heart to heart with an electronic brain that not only costs more than my house, but whose purchase I am forced to finance at the rate of \$90 per hour. As long as the car keeps putting a smile on my face during extended road trips, it will always have a place in my garage – right alongside any of the more modern, finicky machinery I might have picked up along the way. ♦

Editor's Note: Benjamin Hunting is a professional Canadian writer who divides his time between Boston and Montreal. When not training his team of sled dogs back home, he enjoys participating in BMW CCA events in his E34 and covering the automotive and music industries for a variety of publications.



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