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How To Make Your Old Car Seem New

Hannah Elliott, 03.10.09, 04:00 PM EDT

Trying to eke out a couple more years from your vehicle? Here are 10 ways to avoid having to buy a new one.



In Depth: Make Your Old Car Seem New

Lori Johnson drives the same vehicle she bought 21 years ago-- a black 1988 **Toyota** pickup. Her friends can't believe its pristine condition, she says. And in this economy, they are more than a little jealous that she finished making car payments long ago.

As the scaled-down financial markets continue to **lack signs of life**, it's tempting to cut corners to save a few bucks, especially when it comes to car maintenance. But foregoing an oil change or coaxing a few more miles out of an old air filter is not how Johnson racked up 281,000 miles on her truck--and it's not the best way to get new life out of an old car.

In Depth: Make Your Old Car Seem New

"I haven't done a ton of replacing things; I do maintenance," says Johnson, who owns **Ladies Start Your Engines**, an automotive repair class for women. "My engine's still the original engine. I just change the oil every 3,000 miles on that thing. That was what was recommended back then, and it just keeps running and running and running."

The best way to save money on a car? Follow Johnson's lead and maintain it. Simple things, like **waxing a vehicle twice a year** and **getting the car detailed** every so often, are easy to do. And all are cheaper than replacing the car altogether.

In It for the Long Haul

New car sales in the U.S. dropped 18.3% in 2008, from 16.1 million units sold to 13.2 million. The drop means more people are holding on to their cars longer and buying used cars when they need a replacement, says James Clark, general manager of research firm Automotive Lease Guide in Santa Barbara, Calif.

"The challenge is that there really isn't an end in sight yet, and

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so the confidence on the consumer side is extremely low," Clark says.

While consumers wait for the market to turn, they would do well to treat their vehicles like they should treat their own bodies: Fix cosmetic problems before they get out of hand, keep everything clean and respond to nagging problems right away.

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One easy way to rejuvenate a car is to [replace old interior accoutrements](#), like mats and dome lights. You should also [fix tears](#) in the upholstery or invest in plush seat covers to hide stains.

Replacing something as inexpensive as an air filter--roughly \$15 every 15,000 miles--will save gas and even improve highway performance.

"What people don't realize is [driving with an old filter is] like choking your engine," Johnson says. "If air can't get into the engine because it's blocked by this dirty air filter, then you're not going to get as good of performance, and you might even feel hesitation when you're driving, or it will just feel like the car is dragging."

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Exercise Does a Car Good

Older cars should also be "exercised" regularly by [opening up the throttle](#) on the highway and letting the car breathe, says Tony Begley, president of the [Muscle Car Club](#) and owner of [classicmusclecars.com](#). After warming up the engine, take the car up to 50 or 60 miles per hour, and keep it there for several miles. The workout will prevent staleness in the car's mechanics and alert

you to any problems that could have developed while the car sat dormant.

"You have a lot of gaskets in the motor and the transmission in the rear end, so if it's not warmed up, driven to proper temperatures ... what happens is those gaskets contract," Begley says. "When they contract, then you're getting transmission leaks, engine oil pan leaks, intake manifold leaks, exhaust leaks, everything."

On the exterior, [replacing headlights](#) and even side panels will give the car a new look without requiring too much outlay.

Headlights cost several hundred dollars plus labor (checking your owner's manual could save some money here; some models have lights that are relatively easy to replace yourself). And while it can cost \$1,500 to replace a dented or scratched side panel, it's cheaper than buying a new car and looks much better than trying to "fix" it with spray paint and

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Bondo.

The cost of general maintenance and fixing small dents or cracks may feel like unnecessary expenditures. But if you do each thing right the first time, the car will run for years to come, saving thousands over the long haul.

Just ask Lori Johnson.

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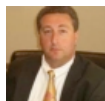
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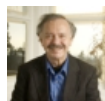
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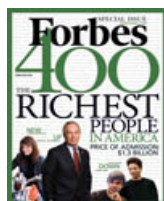


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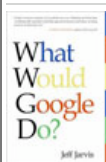
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