A Lesson From My Dashboard

Anna Wells, IMPO Editor

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-Anna Wells

About six weeks ago, I'm turning a corner in my Volkswagen and—bam—it happens. A cartoon-like image of an indistinguishable automotive component starts to glow on my dashboard. I panic, allowing myself briefly to envision my stalled car in a snow bank along the edge of the highway.

Immediately, I consult my owner's manual which suggests that this particular light could be any number of small (or large) problems. I'm instructed to make an appointment and have the car inspected by a trained professional.

Instead, I do what any normal, tight-fisted person who knows nothing about cars does—I ask around. I consult everyone I know, all whom say it is probably nothing. "A lot of lights go haywire in the winter," one person says. "I'd wait a bit until the weather warms up."

So this is what I do, and a week and half later, the light goes off. And then a week following, it goes back on.

But at this point, instead of panic, I am indifferent. I've dealt with this situation once before, I think—and what if I had paid to have it diagnosed, and the light would have just gone off on its own?

Three weeks later, through several cold and warm spells, the light is still on. And my car is starting to act a little funny. It still runs well, just sometimes hesitates off a stop, or at ignition…

The more I let this little light torment me, the more I feel like a fool—worse, a hypocrite. As someone who spends every day writing about the importance of maintenance, here I am taking the opposite approach—my car's on-board diagnostics system is attempting to warn me, and I'm taking a 'believe it when I see it' approach. The reason I'm doing this has nothing to do with what I think is the correct diagnosis—I'll actually believe anything that makes me save the most money, in the short-term.

We're all being hit with what experts are calling an economic recession—budgets are tight; unnecessary expenses are cut. But slashing through budgets with a new ferocity comes with an inherent danger—that we undermine the importance of the things that really do need our attention and money.

The more critically I analyzed the situation, the more I realized I'd somehow convinced myself that the best option was the one with the least investment involved—dangerous thinking from someone who knows better, especially considering the potential financial consequences down the road.

Preventive maintenance is the type of thing where the tangible results are in what you don't see. Don't let budgetary pressures make you disregard some searing warning lights that you normally wouldn't. You don't do yourself, or your facility's equipment, any favors by ignoring your own advice.

Maintenance is not just for times of economic surplus—this is the mantra I'll be repeating to myself as I dial my auto dealership this afternoon to make an appointment with a service technician. Because in the long run, not having your equipment—or car—up and running when you need it, is never worth it.

Comments? Email *IMPO* Editor, Anna Wells: anna.wells@advantagemedia.com. **[1]**

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