

Car Forum

How much for a brake job?

Q: My Ford F-150 4x4 is due for brakes, both front and back. A Ford dealer gave me a price (not including a brake flush) of around \$500.00. On the other hand, I just received a flyer in the mail from a chain brake service that's advertising a \$99.00 special. This includes front and rear pads, resurfacing the rotors, packing the bearings, and bleeding the brake system and a great warranty. If you bring in the flyer they mailed out, they throw in a tire rotation as well. Why is there such a huge difference in price? I assume that brakes all have to meet DOT or other federal standards. D. N., Portland

A: Your question is dear to my heart. It shows how advertising can turn a complex service into a commodity simply by giving it a name and a price. A person is as likely to receive a satisfactory brake service for 99 dollars as he is a satisfactory meal for 99 cents.

If brake pads are all that's needed in the first case, or a quick snack all that's wanted in the second, the final price and the advertised price might actually be the same; but in most cases the customer spends more money.

To be fair though, the analogy isn't quite accurate. Food quality is governed by health department regulations and U.S. Department of Agriculture inspections; brake service quality is determined solely by the choices we make as consumers.

Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (www.nhtsa.gov/cars/rules) govern the required stopping distances of new vehicles and the "performance and labeling requirements for hydraulic, air, and vacuum brake hoses, brake-hose assemblies, and brake-hose fittings."

Other than voluntary brake-industry self-certifications and the threat of legal liabilities, there is no governance of quality for all other replacement brake parts. The wholesale price of an F-150 brake pad set- front or rear- ranges from about \$5.00 to nearly \$100.00.

But there's more to a pad than price. Brake-pad manufacturing chemistry is the subject of dissertations and research departments. Today's friction materials have come a long way from carbon-impregnated horse hide. A top-quality brake pad is highly effective over a broad range of temperatures, resistant to heat degradation, long lasting, non-abrasive, non-dusting, non-noisy and not cheap.

Flat-rate labor to replace pads and turn rotors is about three hours, not including servicing the calipers.

There's a good chance the front wheel bearings on your F-150 can't be repacked because they're inside a sealed assembly; but if they can be, add another hour and about \$20.00 for wheel seals.

The brake system should be flushed, not bled, with every service to minimize brake fade and corrosion damage.

Tire rotation should always be done at no extra charge if all four wheels are already off the vehicle.

The profit margin in a \$99.00 brake job is adequate to support a business only if the cheapest parts and labor are used, or if variations between vehicles allow certain advertised items to be ignored (such as repacking the bearings) or if the job

is substantially upsold using a completed inspection sheet and a smooth sales technique.

Chip Keen, Drive Time, The Oregonian

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