

Wet Sanding

For Show — and for Dough Part I

By Kevin Farrell

Being able to wet sand (or color sand) scratches and other blemishes that are too deep to be buffed out is something that every detailer should be able to do if called upon. As a detailer, this added skill raises your level of professionalism, saves the customer money by keeping the vehicle out of the paint shop, puts you ahead of your competition who may not be able to perform this type of work, and adds a profit center to your shop.

Another aspect of wet sanding — that can generate the kind of income that detailing alone cannot — is wet sanding the entire vehicle to bring the appearance of the paint to show-car-like quality. While jobs like these may not be an everyday occurrence, it can be a niche that you can fill for the car enthusiast, show-car owner, or a discriminating customer who demands perfection in the paint appearance of his vehicle.

KNOWING THE BASICS

Before a detailer attempts to touch a car with sandpaper, he must know exactly what will happen once the process starts. During the wet-sanding process, you are actually “*shaving*” the clear coat off the panel — much the same as the Zamboni machine shaves off a layer of ice on the rink. Sanding is the same thing. What you must remember, however, is that even the least aggressive method of wet sanding is still more aggressive than the heaviest method of compounding.

If you are not careful at all times, you run the risk of sanding through the clear coat into the base coat — and that spells trouble. Over-aggressiveness in sanding will mean a trip to the paint shop for the vehicle.

PAPER AND TOOLS

Sandpaper comes in many different grades. There is paper as aggressive as 60 or 80 grit for sanding metal or body filler. This is certainly not to be used on a painted surface. As the numbers of the paper increase the aggressiveness decreases. Don’t be fooled, though. A piece of 600 or 1000 grit sandpaper can quickly do damage.

A detail shop should have paper ranging from 1000 or 1200 grit as the most aggressive, and 2000 to 2500 as the least aggressive. The reasoning is this: Anything more aggressive than 1000 can do far too much damage. You run a high risk of sanding through the clear coat, or not being able to later remove the deep sand scratches resulting from aggressive paper use. Paper less aggressive than 2500 is a waste of time. You may as well just compound the area. Finishing the job with 2000 or 2500 paper will mean fairly easy sand-scratch removal when it comes time to buff.

You also need a soft-foam or rubber backing pad so that the paper may be wrapped around this pad (not around your fingers!). The backing pads can be harder or softer depending on what you need to accomplish and how

aggressive you want to be with a particular piece of paper.

You will also need a bucket of water to keep cleansing the paper. This removes bits of clear coat that have been sanded off that may clog the paper or scratch the panel. It is a good idea to keep a water bottle handy to spray the area as you come upon it. A small rubber “bondo” squeegee to wipe water away and check your progress is also a good idea to have available, as well as clean towels and an air hose to fully dry an area you want to examine as you finish it.

If you choose, there are orbital air-powered sanders made exclusively for color sanding. The sander is speed-adjustable and some come with a water hose to continually cleanse the surface as you work. The sanding discs come in the same grades as hand sandpaper. This method will save time, but it is a more risky way to do the job.

WHY SAND AN ENTIRE VEHICLE?

You may wonder why it would be necessary to sand an entire vehicle? Or perhaps you’re asking why wet sand a car after it has been painted? Shouldn’t a new paint job look great? You may also want to know how wet sanding is supposed to make the paint look better if it is so aggressive. Many vehicles have what’s called “orange peel” in their paint. This is a hill and valley effect, or as the name implies, looks like the skin of an orange. Orange peel is caused

by the clear coat not flowing or “laying out” as smooth as you would like. This gives a slight hill-and-valley effect that some people just don’t like in their paint jobs. This effect will slightly diminish the overall gloss and clarity of the paint job, so some people choose to have this sanded out of the paint job to increase the vehicle’s shine.

Most factory paint jobs have some degree of orange peel, as do many refinish paint jobs. Some paint jobs have other blemishes such as dirt nibs, dust, runs or sags, or environmental problems that have penetrated deep into the clear coat. In all these instances, simple compounding or polishing alone will not eliminate the problem.

Wet sanding, followed by compounding and polishing, is the only way to create that absolutely perfect finish. So, what’s involved in doing this and how difficult is the process?

BEFORE STARTING, ASK LOTS OF QUESTIONS

Customers who will have this kind of work done tend to be very picky and have a good eye for paint. You need to ask the customer what his expectations are. Does he want total perfection? Does he want a totally flat finish with every bit of orange peel and every imperfection removed? How much money is he willing to spend?

If the car has been refinished, you should ask the customer what shop did the work and if you could speak with the painter. You would, for example, ask the painter what brand of clear coat he used. Some refinish clears have a higher film build than others, and some are easier to sand and buff than others. You would want to know how many coats were applied. If this information can be obtained, it is very helpful to the detailer.

All this investigative questioning can help determine how much clear was applied to the car and how much can be safely removed in the sanding process. The rule of thumb is that refin-



In these pictures, the “orange peel” appearance in the paint can clearly be seen. The reflection of the overhead fluorescent light accentuates the problem in both photographs. This vehicle happens to be a new Mercedes E class. You wouldn’t think a Mercedes would have a look like this, but this is what most factory paint jobs look like up close.



ish paint jobs have much more clear coat on them than a factory paint job. If a refinish paint job has three coats of clear or more, you generally don’t have to worry about sanding through the clear coat. There should be plenty to work with. A factory paint job is much different. You cannot be that aggressive — and the customer needs to know this!

In next month’s issue of *Auto Laundry News*, we will actually get started on a wet-sanding project. We’ll compare sanding scratches to sanding entire

panels, consider the all important correct pricing of the job, and even offer a few tips on where to find customers for this special service. 📷

Kevin Farrell owns and operates Kleen Car (www.kleencarauto.com), a full-service auto detailing business located in New Milford, NJ. Kevin is also an instructor for a detailing program he developed for, and in conjunction with, BMW of North America. His background includes auto dealership experience and training through DuPont, General Motors, and I-Car.