

Wet Sanding

For Show — and for Dough Part II

By Kevin Farrell

In last month's issue of *Auto Laundry News*, we discussed wet-sanding basics, considered the tools required, and suggested that you ask a lot of questions before getting started. This month, we'll compare sanding scratches to sanding entire panels, discuss correct pricing of the job, and finally offer a few tips on where to find customers for this special service.

LET'S GET STARTED

After carefully evaluating the car with the customer, getting as much information as possible about the paint job, and determining the customer's level of expectations, you can get started. The first thing I like to do is take paint-thickness measurements all over the car. I try to document this both for the customer and myself with a digital

camera. I need to know what the film thickness is *before* I start to work on it. I also want to document for the customer how much is being removed. Next, I determine how many steps of sanding I want to do. Once I know what grade of paper I want to start with, I gather all my supplies and start the job.

ENTIRE PANELS VS. SCRATCHES

When you sand an entire panel, the method of holding the sanding block is a bit different than the way you would hold the pad to sand a scratch. In sanding a scratch, you want to keep the area you are sanding to a minimum, so you bring the sanding block up on its edge a bit and sand in short strokes. This gives you better control and

limits the amount of sanding. This is fine for a 6-inch scratch, but if you sand an entire vehicle like this, it will take forever!

When sanding larger areas, you need to keep the entire backing pad flat on the panel as you sand. You should also sand in longer strokes to cover a larger area. Keep the paper wet and clean because it will clog with bits of removed clear coat and could cause deeper scratches than the paper would itself. Continue to often dip the paper in a bucket of water. Also keep track of the paper itself. Once it does not cut well anymore, turn it over to a fresh side, or get a new piece of paper.

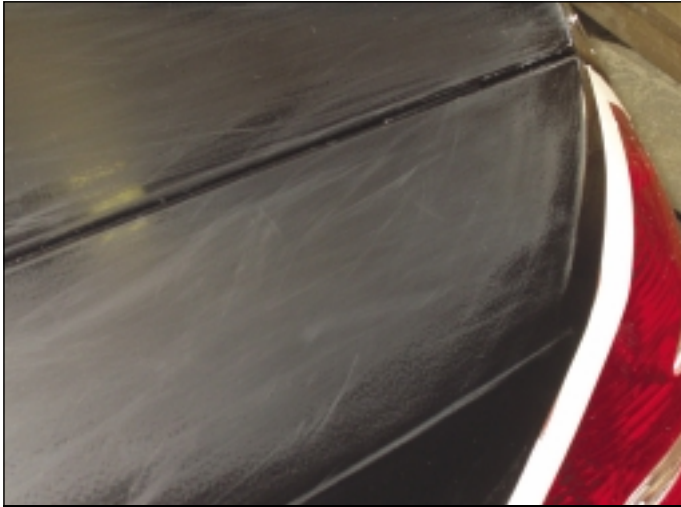
If you are sanding with an orbital sander, frequently spray the paper and the area that you are working on to cleanse it. Change the sanding discs when they get clogged or do not cut anymore.

Constantly evaluate your progress. Periodically dry the panel and inspect it. What you are looking for is no gloss and no orange peel at all. If part of the panel still shines, you have missed a spot. Periodically take a paint reading. See how much clear coat you are removing. This is especially important if you are working on a factory paint job.

You want to finish the job with 2000 or 2500 grit paper. The sand scratches that these grades of paper leave behind are fairly easy to remove. If you started sanding the car with 1200 paper, you need to gradually lighten the grades. You want to eliminate the sand scratches from the previous grade of paper. For instance, if you



In the above picture the "orange peel" appearance in the paint can clearly be seen.



The areas where there is no gloss and no hill-and-valley effect are sanded sufficiently. The areas around the edges and body seems still have a bit of shine and a bit of orange peel. You must be careful in these areas because the paint is extra thin.



After buffing, there is much more gloss and clarity. However, if you look closely, there is still a small amount of orange peel left in the paint, but the paint reading on the gauge in the picture tells me I should not go any further to avoid any problems with removing too much clear coat.

start with 1200 paper, you will need to go to 1500 paper, and then to 2000 paper. You can't skip from 1200 to 2000. Doing this will not eliminate the deeper sand scratch marks made from the 1200 grit paper. Once you have the entire vehicle finished off in either 2000 or 2500 grit, you can begin the buffing process.

BUFFING TO PERFECTION

The whole idea of wet sanding the entire vehicle is to make it look absolutely flawless. The buffing step is critical to achieving this goal. Having the correct buffing products, pads, and of course skill in buffing is critical to achieving a perfect finish.

With the entire vehicle totally sanded, it will have no gloss. It will look horrible! The goal now is to buff the finish to perfection, remove every single scratch and mark, so the finish is absolutely perfect. This will take many steps and many hours. Your first goal is to completely remove all the sand scratch marks. Subsequent buffing steps will involve swirl mark removal and polishing for maximum gloss and clarity. You can't be in a hurry in any buffing step

or you risk missing some imperfections such as sand scratches, or any other blemish in the paint. It needs to be flawless.

LABOR TIME AND PRICING

Customers who are willing to pay for a service such as this will not accept anything less than perfection. You need to satisfy even the toughest critic. To perform work like this takes a tremendous amount of skill and time. What is it worth?

Perfection does not come cheap. The size of the car, how easy the clear coat is to sand and buff, the number of sanding steps required to make it perfect, and the number of buffing steps to remove every single imperfection and produce a flawless finish, all have to be calculated to determine labor time and price.

I have spent as little as 15 hours total to sand and buff a car — and as many as 50 hours! There is no set time. You must get familiar with the entire process and how long it actually takes. Remember, if a small scratch is still visible, it's unacceptable. Somebody at some point will see it. It needs to be flawless!

A labor rate for skilled labor such as this should be at least \$40 per hour. I charge \$50. Multiply your estimated time — based on the parameters I discussed — with the labor rate and add a material charge for sandpaper, masking tape, buffing supplies, etc. Is a job like this worth \$1,000 to \$2,000, or even more? For most people, of course not. But for the people who only care about perfection, it's really not about the money. It's about the car.

Obviously, you need to practice before you work on a customer's car. Practice on scrap panels from the body shop. Make sure you can produce perfection on these scrap panels. Complete the entire process on the scrap panel and multiply the time by the number of panels on the rest of the car to attain your labor time. Or, sand and buff your own vehicle. Look at the results. Look for any little imperfection that still can be eliminated. Keep track of the time and always add into the estimate a bit of a cushion in case of difficulties. Every car is different, and every customer is different. This is a service that can definitely not be menu priced. It's hard work

and sometimes very stressful knowing what the car and paint job is worth. The customer has put his vehicle in your care. What is that worth to him? What is it worth to you?


WHERE TO FIND WORK

I have done some cars that have subsequently gone into shows. The exposure that the car gets usually leads to inquiries from other people who may have show-type cars, or are thinking of painting or restoring a car. If the car you have worked on speaks for itself, people will call. Go to car shows. Examine all the paintwork. Is it flawless? Could a car that you have seen be

improved? I have seen many paint jobs that could have been immensely improved. I have also seen paint jobs that have blown me away because they were so immaculate. What was the difference? Skill and time!

Car clubs are a good place to advertise. They are filled with enthusiasts and fanatics who demand perfection in their cars. Custom car shops that restore cars may do great work, but do not have time to sand and buff their paint jobs. Approach those shops for the sanding and buffing part of the paint job.

This is a very small and elite market. However, there are not many talented people who can do this type of work. You do not need many of these types of

jobs to make money. Speak to people. Let them know what you can do. Let them see what you can do. Customers who insist on perfection in their paint will not go to just anybody. They need a skilled professional. Let them know who you are and what you can do. 

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.