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Dealer - 570-401-4843 jlkurtz@reykurassociatesinc.com

## Are Synthetics Worth the Extra Money?

Lessons from the Tuner Market

by Ed Newman

AMSOIL Marketing & Advertising Manager

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It didn't really start with Vin Diesel. Nevertheless the movie Fast & Furious did help bring the "import tuner" street racing scene into the mass culture. In truth, it has been around on the West Coast for more than two decades.

This article hopes to briefly explain what the "tuner market" is and why quick lube operators might wish to pay attention to this market niche.

Ad Age Online describes the scene this way: "Tuners: They're young, auto-savvy trendsetters willing to spend money customizing or "tricking out" their cars. It's a Fast and Furious crowd, an urban, hip-hopping car culture with a contemporary twist on the baby boomers' muscle-car era of the 1960s that has inspired everything from specialized magazines to movies and video games."

There are probably three main characteristics that exemplify the tuner mindset:

- Personalization based on lifestyle and use
- Products chosen out of choice, not necessity
- Passion

### Kids With Money

The amount of money these young people spend on their cars is mind-boggling. When I was at the SEMA Show in 2003 I was told - this was clearly a subjective observation - they spend approximately \$15,000 on their vehicles, starting with about \$5,000 on the sound systems, then \$5,000 on the exterior (body, wheels, appearance features etc.) and then \$5,000 on performance (under the hood).

I was led to believe they spend money on sound systems first. This was incorrect. A more recent SEMA study revealed that kids in the tuner market spend their money on performance first. Then wheels and sound. Typical performance upgrades might include a Fidanza Flywheel, Tanabe Coilovers, HKS Intercooler, Greddy Boost Controller, HKS Super Sequential Blow Off Valve, Greddy Titanium Exhaust and Unorthodox Racing Cam Gears. As they say, this is not your father's Oldsmobile.

The tuner scene is more than a market. It's a lifestyle, one that is politically incorrect and edgy, sexy and dynamic, blurring the lines between cars and music and fashion statement.

### Tuner Favorites

When I first become aware of this market niche I incorrectly blurred the line between tuners and imports. Though frequently called the "Import Tuner" market, many people would be surprised to find two of the top ten favorite tuner platforms (car models) are U.S. cars. In point of fact, tuner aficionados are not only specific with regards to favorite makes and models, they also have select years in which those vehicles have the appropriate attributes to be considered cool and worth one's time. Here is a list assembled by Performance Audio and Sound, called the Ten Top Tuner

### **Platforms.**

|                       |                                      |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Chevy Cavalier        | 1981-2004                            |
| Dodge SRT-4           | 2003-Present new age horsepower wars |
| Honda Civic           | 1972-Present                         |
| Mazda RX-7            | 1993-1997                            |
| Mitsubishi Lancer EVO | 2003-Present turbocharged AWD        |
| Nissan 240SX          | 1989-1998                            |
| Nissan 350Z           | 2003-Present                         |
| Subaru WRX            | 2002-Present                         |
| Toyota Supra          | 1993-1998                            |

According to a 2003 Compact Performance Market Study by Babcox Research, Honda was the top ranked most-often modified model. Other prominent brand names in this arena included Toyota, Acura, Nissan, Volkswagen, Mitsubishi, Mazda, Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Porsche, Audi, Lexus, Infiniti, Saab, Jaguar, Volvo, Isuzu, Suzuki and even Ford. Like the muscles cars of the sixties, kids know what's what when it comes to these cars. To the average schmoe, a Honda's just another stylish car, but to the tuner crowd it is the godfather of cool because there were so many ways to swap out the engine and it has endless hookup combinations.

While visiting a local shop that specializes in these cars - the fellow buys them at auto auctions, then jazzes them up - we talked briefly about his cherry red Mazda RX-7 with its rotary engine and twin turbo setup. To my surprise, he told me he's on his third engine, and that the car has a reputation for blowing engines. When I asked why he didn't just get rid of it, you would think I asked him to discard one of his kids. If you have the passion, and the money for the amenities, getting a new engine is a piece of cake. Bling! Bling!

### **Quick Lube App**

Whereas the tuner market has grown considerably in the past decade, as a percentage of the market it is still but a fragment of the overall vehicle market. And at first blush, you may think it not even an interesting one for quick lube owners because these do-it-yourselfers pretty much do it all themselves. Nevertheless, there really are some important lessons we can learn from observing the tuner craze.

Passion for performance means a market for synthetics. As has been frequently noted, people have different buying motivations. Many people want convenience, others want cheap. But a large segment of the market has a passionate relationship with the vehicle they drive, whether they're doing the work themselves or not. When you pop the hood and see accessories, you should be sure to ask your customer if he or she would like to upgrade to synthetics.

One of the big arguments against synthetics motor oils is that "Yes, they are better but they are expensive." When you open your eyes to the kind of money kids are throwing at their vehicles these days, you know that money is not an issue. They want what they want. And a lot of your customers have the same desires.

*Ed Newman is Marketing & Advertising Manager for AMSOIL INC.*

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