THE

New Auto Services Customer

81% of auto service shoppers would avoid a business after finding negative reviews or unanswered complaints online.

BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU

Introduction

How customers choose an auto services business has changed. The search has fragmented across referrals, search engines, review sites, and social platforms. AI tools have entered the process for younger customers, and nearly everyone now compares multiple businesses before deciding. The Better Business Bureau commissioned a study of recent auto service shoppers across the western United States to understand the choices customers make when selecting an auto services business.

Key areas of exploration

- → Why customers who research carefully still report being disappointed
- → Where customers look for an auto services business, and how that differs by age
- → What evidence raises a customer's confidence, and when in the process it matters

What's Inside

How customers find you now

- → Searches run across many channels, and only referrals and traditional search reach at least half of shoppers.

  Nearly half of customers ages 25 to 40 use AI tools to find a shop, compared with 7% of customers over 55.
- → Almost every customer researches more than one business, and 65% research three or more.

Why all that research still ends in disappointment

- → Two out of three auto service shoppers chose a business on reviews or word of mouth and were disappointed.
- → Disappointed and never-disappointed customers rate reviews, documentation, and pricing almost identically.
- → Four out of five would cancel or avoid booking after finding negative reviews or unanswered complaints.
- → Customers who have been let down before are more likely to return to and recommend a business that gets it right.

What proof looks like now

- → Clear pricing leads every factor customers said builds trust, at 77%.
- → Documentation matters more as the repair gets more expensive, from 35% under $750 to 58% over $1,500.
- → Half of customers would return to a transparent business over a cheaper competitor, and more would recommend one.

Who This eBook Is For

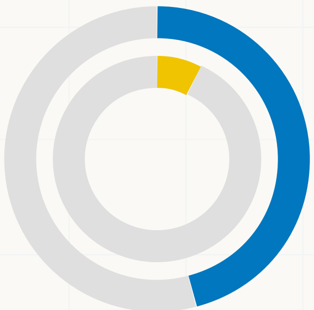
- → Auto repair shop owners
- → Dealer service departments
- → Body shops
- → Fixed operations directors
- → Automotive service managers
- → Multi-location automotive business leaders

THEME 1

How Customers Find You Now

Customers are searching across referrals, search engines, review sites, social platforms, and AI tools, and where they look depends on how old they are.

Younger customers are finding shops through AI



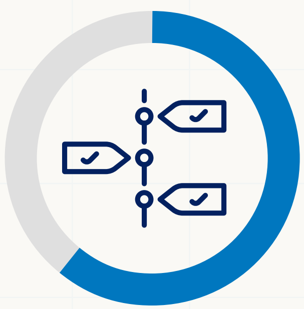
46%

of auto service customers ages 25–40 use AI tools to discover providers, compared with only

7%

of customers over age 55.

Reviews are the first credibility check you face



61%

of auto service shoppers consider recent customer reviews very important when deciding whether to schedule service with a new business.

No single channel reaches most customers

Auto service shoppers typically discover new providers through:

60% Referral from friends or family

51% Traditional search engines

47% Customer review websites

38% Social media

34% AI search tools

31% Online advertisements

13% Referral from another business

12% Local directories

4% Other

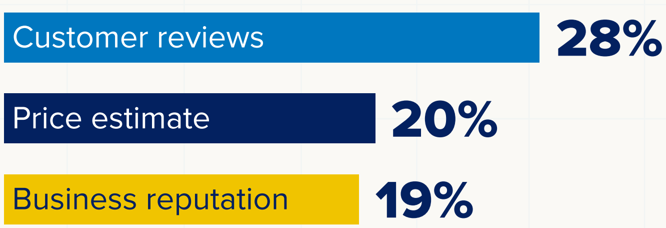
Reputation decides who survives the first cut

65%

of auto service shoppers find customer reviews and business reputation very important when narrowing options for providers discovered online.

Reviews outweigh price when customers pick a shop

Asked what matters most when scheduling service with an unfamiliar auto business, shoppers say:



Most customers are weighing you against two other businesses

96%

of auto service shoppers research more than one business before making a decision, and

65%

research three or more auto service businesses.

What this means for your business

1

Search your business the way a customer would. Check Google, a review site, and an AI assistant, and read what comes back.

2

Claim and complete every listing, not just the one you check. No single channel reaches even half of customers. Referrals lead at **60%**, search follows at **51%**, review sites at **47%**. Being easy to find in one place leaves most of the market looking somewhere you aren't.

3

Ask every customer for a review, not just the ones you expect to be happy. **61%** say recent reviews are very important, so a wall of praise from three years ago does less for you than a steady flow from this month. Selective asking also violates the review platforms' own rules.

4

If your customers skew younger, an AI assistant is summarizing you to them. It reads the same listings, reviews, and complaint records everything else reads, so the work is the same. The difference is that a customer sees a summary instead of the sources.

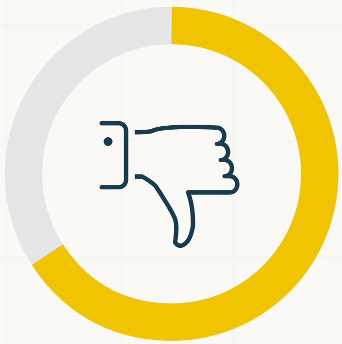
THEME 2

How to Build Trust and Avoid Disappointment

Customers research carefully and are disappointed anyway, because reviews and word of mouth are the best information most of them have and neither can tell them how their own repair will go.

Two out of three customers have been let down by a business they researched

66%



of auto service shoppers have selected an auto business based primarily on reviews or word-of-mouth recommendations and then been disappointed with the experience.

These are not customers who chose at random. They followed the indicators most people rely on, and it did not predict their experience. A review is written after the fact, by someone whose repair is already finished. It records how a business treated another customer, which is useful, and it is not the same as knowing how it will treat the next one.

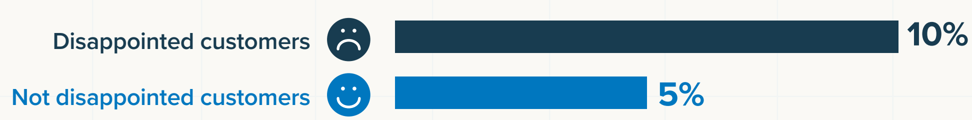
Disappointment does not change what customers look for

Across every trust measure in this survey, customers who have been disappointed and customers who have not been answer almost identically. **61%** of disappointed customers call recent reviews very important, against **58%** of those who have never been let down. On documentation raising their confidence, **45%** against **48%**. On surprise charges, **64%** against **61%**. Being let down does not teach a customer to look for something different. It teaches them to look harder at the same things. That is what keeps the cycle going: the signal that failed them is still the best one they have, so they go back to it, and some portion of them are disappointed again.

	Recent reviews very important	Documentation raises confidence	Surprise charges
Disappointed customers	61%	45%	64%
Not disappointed customers	58%	48%	61%

The one exception

Customers who have never experienced that letdown place business reputation first at **29%** and identify BBB Accreditation as their most important proof point at twice the rate of previously disappointed customers:



A disappointed customer is worth more to you, not less

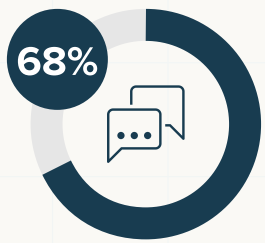
The instinct is to treat these customers as harder to win. The data points the other way.

Among shoppers who have been disappointed before,

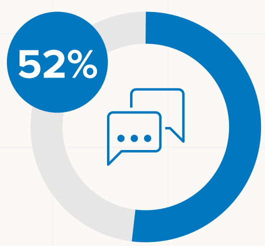
58% say they would return to a transparent, reliable business even when a competitor is cheaper, compared with

42% of customers who have never had that experience.

On recommending a business that communicates clearly and documents its work, it is **68%** against **52%**.



A customer who has been let down before knows what the alternative looks like, which appears to make the difference more obvious to them when a business gets it right.



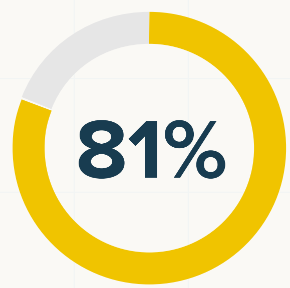
AI makes the search faster. It does not make the decision better

Among customers who discover providers through AI search,

76% have been disappointed after choosing a business based on reviews or word of mouth, compared with

61% of customers who do not discover providers through AI search.

Unresolved complaints stop customers from booking



of auto service shoppers would be likely or very likely to cancel or avoid scheduling service after finding negative reviews or unanswered complaints online.

A negative review is someone else's opinion. An unanswered complaint is a decision you made, and it is the half of this a business controls. A complaint with a documented resolution attached reads differently than one left in silence

What this means for your business

1

Respond to every negative review, including the old ones. The response is not for the person who wrote it. It is for the next customer reading the thread, deciding whether a bad day at your shop is a pattern or an exception.

2

Answer open complaints wherever they are posted, and say what you did. A complaint with a resolution attached reads differently than one sitting in silence.

3

Assume a first-time customer arrives skeptical. Two out of three have already been let down by a business they researched carefully, and that skepticism is not something you can argue them out of.

Theme 3 — What Proof Looks Like

Reviews get a customer to schedule service. What a business shows them from that point on decides whether they approve the repair, come back, and recommend it, and the more expensive the job, the more they need to see.

Nothing builds trust like a price a customer can understand

Auto service shoppers say the factors that most contribute to trust are:

- Clear pricing and estimates — 77%
- Positive customer reviews — 56%
- Long-standing reputation — 47%
- Warranty coverage — 46%
- Recommendations from friends or family — 46%
- Responsive customer service — 39%
- Photos or documentation of repairs — 38%
- Professional certifications — 36%
- Frequent communication updates — 34%
- Other — 1%

A surprise charge is the fastest way to lose a customer

63% of auto service shoppers strongly agree that surprise charges are one of the fastest ways for an auto business to lose their trust.

Customers approve what they can see

47% of auto service shoppers say photos, estimates, and repair documentation significantly increase their confidence when approving expensive vehicle repairs.

The bigger the repair, the more proof customers need

For estimates over $1,500, 58% of customers say photos, estimates, and repair documentation significantly increase their confidence. That compares with 35% of customers considering repairs under $750.

Booking the appointment and approving the repair are two separate decisions. The second one happens on a phone call about a cost the customer did not expect, and photos and a written estimate are what make it easier to say yes.

Updates during the repair decide whether customers return

62% of auto service shoppers say consistent status updates throughout the repair process are very important to deciding whether they keep using the same business.

Customers will drive farther for a business they trust

55% of auto service shoppers consider trustworthiness much more important than convenience or proximity when choosing a service business.

Transparency keeps customers and earns referrals

52% of auto service shoppers would be very likely to return to a repair shop they have used before if the experience was transparent and reliable, even when a competitor offers a lower price, and 63% would be very likely to recommend a business that provides clear communication, transparent pricing, and detailed repair documentation.

Loyalty grows with the size of the job. Among customers facing estimates over $1,500, 63% would return to a transparent business rather than take a lower price elsewhere, compared with 42% on smaller repairs.

Where the evidence runs out

The estimate, the photographs, the published rates, and the updates during the job, those all come from the business itself.

Everything else, the only other information a customer has, comes from other customers, written after the repair was already finished. And 66% of those customers were disappointed by a business chosen that way.

What this means for your business

Put a written estimate that is easily understood in customers' hands as soon as possible, with parts and labor separated. Clear pricing came in first on the list of what builds trust, ahead of customer reviews and reputation. An itemized estimate is the simplest way to deliver it.

The more expensive the repair, the more customers need to see. 35% of customers facing an estimate under $750 say photos and documentation significantly raise their confidence. When the estimate is more than $1,500, that number jumps to 58%.

If the cost changes, communicate the difference. 63% of customers strongly agree a surprise charge is the fastest way to lose their trust.

Publish what you charge, including your diagnostic fee. Any customer who has to call to get a number will often call somebody else instead, and 96% of them are already talking to another shop.

Send updates while the job is underway, even when there is nothing to report. 62% of customers say consistent status updates influence whether they keep using the same business.

Report Summary

Two out of three auto services customers have selected a business based on reviews or a recommendation and been disappointed with their experience. These are not customers who chose carelessly. Nearly all of them compared more than one business and two-thirds compared three or more.

The distance between how carefully customers choose and how often it still goes wrong is what this report set out to examine.

The research indicates that a customer's own past disappointment shapes how they evaluate the next business. It also indicates that those customers are more likely to return to and recommend a business that meets their expectations.

Pricing and documentation are what customers point to. Clear pricing and estimates rank ahead of every other trust factor at 77%. Documentation matters more as the repair grows more expensive, from 35% on estimates under $750 to 58% over $1,500. And 63% strongly agree that a surprise charge is among the fastest ways for a business to lose their trust.

55% say trustworthiness matters much more than convenience or proximity. Customers will drive past a closer shop and pay more than a competitor is charging, provided the business has given them proof it will do what it says.