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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

CRANKY CONSUMER | JUNE 23, 2011

Deconstructing Car Dings in the Driveway

By ELIZABETH GARONE

At some point, inevitably, your car gets dinged or dented. While it might not seem worthy of an insurance call or a visit to the body shop, it bothers you every time you see it.

If the damage is smaller than a football, you may be able to bypass the body shop and still get the dings fixed. There are a number of services that offer paintless dent repair, which involves using specialized metal rods to push out small dents from the inside. Unlike with a typical body-shop repair, there is no sanding, body filling or repainting needed. It works best on late-model vehicles, which have stronger bodies and more resilient paint.

Most services charge by the dent, which is still cheaper than full-body work. Since it doesn't involve heavy machinery or repainting, technicians will do repairs at customers' homes. We put paintless dent repair to the test with four cars with dings, using some nationwide franchises as well as independent operations.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, we called Collision on Wheels for a free estimate to fix a baseball-size dent and a couple of door dings of a 2007 Toyota. The estimator said the price would depend on the location of the dents; it would be cheaper if they were on the same panel. Of the three dents we had, two were on the same panel.



Hal Mayforth

We were surprised when a truck with a different name pulled up for our appointment. Turns out the company subcontracts out its smaller jobs to Frank Loureiro and his one-man business, Super Dents. With the car in the driveway, Mr. Loureiro opened up the panels from underneath and inserted golf-club-size rods behind them, using them to gently massage and push out each area. Within a few minutes, the dents started to disappear. He removed a couple of very small dings at the edge of the door panel at no charge. Roughly an hour later, the dents were gone and the panels smooth to the touch.

In Boston, we tried David Woodward, owner of DingSmith, for a grapefruit-size dent on the rear passenger door of a 2004 Volkswagen. We texted him pictures of the dent and informed Mr. Woodward that the dent had previously been "fixed" twice—once by ourselves with a plunger and once by a detailing service. The dent popped back after each fix. Mr. Woodward said he would guarantee his work for the car's lifetime.

Upon seeing the car, Mr. Woodward said he could fix the dent but not an adjacent crease. He used a long, thin metal tool with a blunt end to reach in through the window and behind the dent to push it out. It looked like it worked at first, but it reappeared when he tried to test it by pushing it in with his hand.

He tried to fix it again, hitting a small rubber tip with a mallet to reshape the metal around the dent. The dent was really gone this time.

In Phoenix, a 1999 Jeep had a golf-ball-size dent in the hood. When we called Unique Dent Removal, owner Quin Adams said he rarely does home repairs these days. Most of his business comes from body shops and car dealers. He was particularly busy when we called because of damage done to cars by a major hailstorm that recently hit the area.

(While none of the cars we used had hail damage, hail storms turned out to be a problem in a number of areas in the country, increasing wait times for appointments and causing some services we called to refuse at-home repair jobs altogether because of the increase in business. Some services charge on a case-by-case basis, rather than per dent; others won't take on the problem if the dents are too large or too deep.)

Due to the backlog of storm-related work, we decided to take the car to him for repairs. After 20 minutes of a tap here and a push there, the dent was gone. Mr. Adams noticed a few tiny dings on the hood and removed them at no charge. He also waxed and buffed the entire hood. We were delighted with the service and results.

In Seattle, there was a door dent on a 1997 Subaru. We called Scratch Master and spoke to the owner, Brian Lewis. He said the company would do an onsite estimate and would charge us \$20 for it if we decided not to do the repair.

We called on a Monday and Mr. Lewis came out to do the repair on Thursday. We had a small dent on one of the passenger doors, which turned out to be in a difficult place to repair because the dent was on top of a beam within the door. Mr. Lewis explained that with a normal door dent, he would insert a tool through the window, push it down, and rotate it inside the door to push it out. With our dent, he said if he went down through the window, the amount of leverage required to fix the dent could break the window.

Instead, Mr. Lewis opened the door and inserted a tool through a small hole near the door latch, leveraging it to push out the dent. After fixing the dent, he covered up the hole with a rubber plug. He cautioned that sometimes the work could slightly crack the paint. We were satisfied with the results. If we look carefully, we can still tell there's a bit of a flaw in the paint where the dent was. Though no one would know it was there but us.

—Jane Hodges in Seattle, Laura Johannes in Boston and Peter King in Phoenix contributed to this article.

Ding, Dong: The Dent Repairman Is Here

Here's how four services specializing in at-home, paintless dent repairs compare:

COMPANY	DENTS	ESTIMATE / ACTUAL COST	COMMENT
Collision on Wheels of the Bay Area (San Francisco Bay Area) collisiononwheels.com	Small dents on both the passenger door and front side panel.	\$210 for three small dents / actual cost was the same.	Work completed in under an hour. No evidence of the dents after the work was done. Required separate appointments for the estimate and repair.
DingSmith (Boston) dingsmith.com	Dent about the size of a grapefruit in passenger door.	\$200/ \$150.	Technician arrived on time and fixed dent in 15 minutes. Unable to fix a crease next to the dent, but we were told that in advance and weren't charged for it.
Unique Dent Removal (Phoenix) uniquedentremoval.com	Golf-ball-size dent on the hood.	\$75 to \$125 / \$75.	Technician removed some small dings for free as well as buffed and polished the entire hood, all in half an hour.
Scratch Master (Seattle) thescratchmaster.com	Barely noticeable dent in passenger door.	\$175 / \$192 including tax.	Dent was visibly improved in less than one hour. Technician was professional and upfront about how he would do the work and any risks involved.

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