



# RV Appearance Restoration

The way to get started introducing mobile detailing services

by Randy Lowe

Over the last few years, I've received numerous phone calls and e-mails asking how to add RV appearance restoration to an auto detailing business? The first question you have to ask yourself is, are there RV customers in the market area I compete in? Most likely there are.

With the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association, known as RVIA, serving as watch dog over the RV industry, keeping quality standards in check, as well as the national campaign "Go RVing," RV dealerships are selling well in excess of 70 units per month. The market is definitely out there!

## Finding the Customers

There are two main sources of customers: private owners and dealers. We have found our best source of retail customers has been referral or word-of-mouth. The referrals come from first of all the customers that have used our service. Next are RV repairs shops, RV dealers, RV supply stores and RV parks for both full timers and traveling RVers. Other sources of referrals have come from RV storage facilities, but I have found they are hard to work with.

### Private Owners

The next source is the most obvious source of RV customers. The customers you already serviced; that large diesel pickup you just did a full detail on with the fifth wheel hitch in the back. Did you ask the customer if he had an RV that needed to be detailed? Or the customer with the small compact sedan or four-wheel drive with a tow bar on the front, and had their motor home washed or polished and waxed. These are just a few opportunities to find RV customers.

### Dealers

RV dealerships can provide a great source of work. You can provide a dealership with two types of service: exterior reconditioning and interior cleaning.

Pricing the dealer work, you have to remember the statement, "The race to the bottom." The reason the dealer is contacting you in the first place is for you to provide them your services. They have no one in-house to do this type of work for them, and it's not the same as auto detailing and not just anyone can do an appearance restoration on an RV. The dealers we work with pay

retail price. Oh yes, we have the local mobile guy that will come in and underbid us and temporarily take one or two coaches away, but as in all detailing quality, integrity and a good business relationship with the dealer will keep them coming back to you.

The worst thing you can do is base your prices for dealers on the amount of work they send you. Everybody pays the same. The reason being, if one month your highest volume motorized dealer sent you 10 coaches, and your highest volume towable dealer sent two, the next month it might be vice versa. Your motorized dealer will want the same price he paid last month, and your towable dealer will want to know why he paid more for his work last month.

## RV Detailing Services

There are three main services that you will provide for the RV customer: exterior washing, polishing and waxing, and interior cleaning.

### Exterior Washing

We'll break this down into three wash categories.

- ▶ **Detail wash:** this service consists of starting at the top and working your way to the bottom. While still on the ground, enter the coach, run the slides out, raise the TV antenna and satellite dish, if so equipped.

Once on the roof, watch your step and work your way from the front to the rear, spraying the underside of the TV antenna and satellite dish. Slide out awnings and the top of the main awning, making sure that any skylights and see-through roof vents are clean and spot-free.

Back on the ground, roll out the main awning and pressure wash both the underside, topside and inside of the support arms and rafters. Now move to the driver side of the coach. Starting at the front, working from top to bottom, start the wash procedure. Be sure to clean wheels and tires and wheel wells as you go, and any slide out mechanisms that can be seen while the slides are out.

Work your way around the coach until you come to the main awning, then roll it up and finish the wash procedure at the front.

- ▶ **Regular wash:** this service consists of cleaning the front, sides and back and the wheels and dressing tires only. This service is mostly desired by the customer that's traveling and just wants to maintain exterior appearance of their vehicle.
- ▶ **Roof wash:** this service is most desired by our seniors. They're more than able to keep up the exterior of their coach, but aren't comfortable going up on the roof. Follow the same procedure as in the detail wash.



**Detailing the exterior of the RV.**

### **Polishing and Waxing**

This service can be as simple as applying a paint sealant to a full body paint coach. Or as complicated as compounding, polishing and applying wax or sealant to a heavily oxidized filon and gel coat exterior. Applying a sealant or wax surface protectant to a new or excellent condition coach can be done quite easily with an orbital style polisher.

When restoring a heavily oxidized, faded, chalky, filon or gel-coat exterior surface a high-speed polisher is necessary. We have found that a 100 percent wool pad is the best for this work. Remember to wear eye and ear protection.

### **Interior Cleaning**

Cleaning the inside of an RV is much like cleaning a house. Complete detail includes the bathroom, kitchen and living room areas.

Additionally, the carpets and fabric seats will need to be cleaned using a hot water extractor or dry vapor steamer. The ceiling in most of your newer RVs is made of a material that looks like carpeting, and goes by the trade name of Stratus. I have seen this cleaned using a hot water extractor, but is rarely soiled so severely that it needs this aggressive method of cleaning. In most instances, your dry vapor steamer, one extension and the rectangle or tool, wrapped with a microfiber towel will do the job. Many coaches have leather or suede captains chairs, barrel chairs and sofas. These can be cleaned with your normal leather cleaning methods and products.

Bathrooms, as a bathroom in the home, can become very grimy. Again your dry vapor steamer and all-purpose cleaners will get the job done. When it comes to the

showers many times they will be laden with soap scum, hard water stains and rust stains. Over time, we have used many different methods cleaning the showers and tub area; from a high-speed buffer and compound to a method that we now use, utilizing a commercial shower tub and tile cleaner which is available at home improvement stores.

The kitchen areas again can be a real challenge with cooking grease and grease splatter on the cook top under the vent hood. A good-quality citrus degreaser works wonders on this type of grease. The cook top needs to be removed and taken outside of the coach and then sprayed with oven cleaner, following the directions. Under the cook top in the burner area, needs to be cleaned as well. This area will collect food particles, boil over spills and grease spills which can also be a major cause of odors in a coach. Your citrus degreaser and dry vapor steamer will handle this job with ease. For the oven, if the coach is equipped with one, use oven cleaner, and be sure to remove the shelves and racks.

Although complete interior detail jobs usually average only one to two per month, our customers request many other interior services. The number one would be carpet cleaning, followed by upholstery cleaning. Another service that is becoming very popular is cleaning interior windows, screens and mini-blinds.

The services that can be offered to customers on the interior are endless: carpet repair, carpet stain removal, carpet dyeing and carpet replacement, vinyl and leather repair, window screen repair and window tinting.

### **Pricing Correctly**

Pricing RV detailing services can be tricky at first! The biggest mistake you can make is to underestimate the time it will take to complete the service. There is nothing worse then to underestimate a project and spending several more hours than intended, and then being frustrated that you haven't charged enough. Even as long as we've been at it, I still get fooled on interiors.

The main reason you might under-price the job is the fear that the customer might say no. Sometimes you just have to decide what is worse, under pricing the job and losing a hundred or so dollars, or moving on to the next customer who will pay the price.

### **Formula to Pricing**

The challenge in pricing RV detailing services is that the units vary widely in size and condition. A simple way to handle this is to price by the foot. The formulas that I use, and have found many other RV restoration specialists use as well is as follows: length divided by two times your hourly rate. This will give you a median price that can be adjusted up or down with age and condition of the coach.

If I can offer any advice that will help make the right pricing decisions, it would be this, if you question whether you're charging enough, **you're not!**



**Completed RV detailing jobs.**

## **Equipment**

If you're already operating a professionally equipped appearance restoration business, you already have many of the tools and chemicals necessary to take on RV services. Compounds, polishes, waxes, sealants, all-purpose cleaner, tire dressing, degreasers and metal polish are compatible for both automobiles and RVs. Your hot water extractor, dry vapor steamer, orbital polishers, high-speed polishers and pressure washer can be used on the RV as well.

There are a few things to consider with your compounds and polishes, especially when restoring a heavily oxidized filon or gel-coat surface. Colors transfer; those heavy-duty compounds, dark brown and dark red, will transfer color to this surface. So a white or light colored compound is necessary.

Specialty products; many of the chemical manufacturers have specialty products for gel-coat and filon surfaces. You can purchase these products but most likely they are automotive products that have been relabeled. **I am a firm believer it is 10 percent product and 90 percent application.**

### **Special Equipment: Scaffolding, Ladders & Lighting**

There are many types of scaffolding. You can rent, purchase or build your own, and without them you would not be able to reach the heights necessary to polish the exteriors of the coaches. Working off a ladder is not only dangerous, but you can only work on a small area at a time, without climbing down, moving the ladder, and then back up the ladder.

Ladders: at least a one 12 foot or 14 foot is needed for the coaches that do not have ladders built onto them, in order to gain access to the roof.

Lighting: most fixed location lighting is in the ceiling, but when working on an RV it's necessary to have lighting from the side. High output florescent lighting at the 10 foot level works best. In our shop, we also have strategically placed 500 W halogen lights at the 10 foot level.

## **Summary**

Providing service for RVs is a way to increase your profits without a large investment in new equipment and chemicals. There is a large population of private RV owners who are willing to purchase the services to keep their coaches looking great. With some marketing to different RV service providers and your current customer base, along with the right pricing structure and a commitment to quality service, you can take advantage of this profitable business.

**ACCB**

*Randy Lowe is a master detailer who has owned and operated Custom Detail since 1992, located in Salem, Ore. He has more than 30 years experience in the boat and RV building, repair and appearance restoration business. He is a member of the NAPDR. To contact Randy, please visit [www.randyscustomdetail.com](http://www.randyscustomdetail.com).*