

# Personalizing vehicles increasingly popular with their owners

BY TOM TRACEY  
Special to the Record-Eagle

"The first stop people make after leaving the dealership is right here," said Steve Navarro, owner of Love Your Car in Traverse City.

Navarro customizes vehicles with everything from the practical to the outrageous. On a recent midday visit, Navarro's service bays were full of vehicles undergoing a transformation from box stock to custom.

What are people doing to their vehicles to set them apart from others?

"I'm selling a lot of window graphics," said Navarro. While the see-through design is not visible to the driver inside,

people outside the vehicle are treated to a panoramic scene spanning the rear window.

Benefits include increased security, UV protection and personalization. Some of the more striking of the 118 choices include combination flags ("American Pride, Mexican Heritage") and nature scenes ("Sedona Moonrise"). The

scenes are available for around \$115.

"Pretty soon, you'll be able to place your favorite digital photo across the rear window of your vehicle," he said.

"Remote starters are also hot. They allow you to warm your car in the winter or cool it in the summer while you are still inside your home. This can be important if the car doors have iced shut."

Depending on features, remote starters are available for around \$100.

For truck owners, the top three accessories might be door mats, side entry steps and high-tech tonneau covers.

"With our weather, good floor mats are a must," he said.

Love Your Car carries custom molded floor mats that are built deep like a tub to capture debris, mud and water before they have a chance to ruin the carpet or rust the floor pan.

Depending on the vehicle, prices start at around \$100.

One enhancement to trucks are tonneau covers, which

offer an alternative to an open pick-up bed. With the new retractable tonneau covers, pesky snaps have been replaced with tension slides and Velcro, resulting in smoother operation. Installing a tonneau cover can contribute to a neater appearance, better cargo security and improved gas mileage (due to wind flowing over the inside tailgate). A quality retractable tonneau cover sells for around \$429.

Interestingly enough, vehicle manufacturers are becoming more accommodating to the aftermarket. For example, Navarro recently noticed factory-installed anchor points underneath a truck hood for installing bug deflectors.

Trucks and SUVs, however, are not the only vehicles benefiting from new trends in personalization. Witness the "fast and furious" customization of compact cars such as the Honda Civic.

"A lot of younger kids are tuning these engines for performance," said Peter Haines

of Redmond Automotive in Traverse City, "because they're cheap to modify."

To accomplish this, a handheld device with a screen and control pad is plugged into the engine electronics to re-program such things as fuel delivery, timing and shift points for maximum performance.

Vehicles can gain another 10 to 20 horsepower, and programming updates can be downloaded through the Internet.

To reflect this altered performance, cosmetic "ground effects" are also added to enhance the appearance of the vehicle.

"Rims are key to modifying a vehicle's appearance," said Haines. "That, and body kits, will make it look low to the ground."

Body kits — the use of skirts and spoilers — a popular way to lower the silhouette of a stock vehicle. Another way is to shorten the springs.

And drivers consider an upgraded stereo system mandatory for effective cruis-

ing. "Stereos are getting really hot right now," he said. "Subs (subwoofers), satellite radios and MP3s, especially."

And perhaps an upgrade for tracking expenses is in order — other than an old envelope in the glove box stuffed with repair receipts. Enter CARCare software. CARCare tracks automotive expenses, repair history and even gives service reminders. The software interfaces with a Palm Pilot and Windows, so a user can capture information while on the road and later download it onto a home computer.

For example, a trip to the repair shop can be documented by entering part number, description, price and vendor, or the entire receipt can be scanned as an image for future viewing. Operating costs between multiple vehicles can be compared and fuel economy monitored. The mobile version is under \$20, while the expanded home version is under \$30 at [www.carcaresoftware.com](http://www.carcaresoftware.com).

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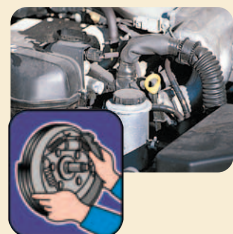
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