

Spin is In ... But Here Are the Facts

Contributed by Bob Chabot
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Guest blogger Bob Chabot, an automotive writer based in Bedford, Texas, shares his thoughts on the recently announced voluntary service information agreement in Canada. He asks readers to consider how the truth matters when it comes to the issues that can rocket or ruin your business. Chabot believes the recently signed voluntary service information accord signed in Canada is being subjected to spin. Here's his take on the issue.

The Canadian auto industry reaches a voluntary agreement on service information.

By Bob Chabot, Guest Blogger

Admittedly, I must confess to my bias here. I am Canadian, and it just seems to me that Canucks are better at creating acronyms than Americans. Maybe it's our long cold winters? But take CASIS vs. NASTF for instance. At least one can pronounce CASIS.

If you will kindly let me bore you with a few facts, I'll tell you what I really think.

Can you feel the echo?

The Canadian Automotive Service Information Standard (CASIS) changes the Canadian service and repair landscape. This voluntary agreement requires automakers to provide access to service, repair, training and tool information to all service and repair shops by May 10, 2010. The agreement is the follow-up to a May 1, 2009, Letter of Intent (LOI) agreed to at an earlier meeting in April.

Dale Finch (right), NATA vice president, introduces the Honorable Tony Clement (left) of Industry Canada at a press conference announcing the CASIS accord held at Rolland Levesque & Sons Garage in Ottawa Sept. 29.

(Photo courtesy of NATA.)

Three federal Canadian government organizations – Industry Canada (similar to the U.S. Department of Commerce), the Competition Bureau (akin to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission) and Environment Canada – have observed the lengthy negotiation process leading to the accord. Industry Canada Minister Tony Clement says “CASIS maintains choice in the vehicle repair marketplace by providing independent repair shops with access to the same information and tools as dealerships.”

Signatories included two automaker organizations – the Association of International Automobile Manufacturers of Canada and the Canadian Vehicle Manufacturers' Association – and one service and repair national organization, the National Automotive Trades Association (NATA). The Automotive Industries Association (AIA) of Canada, an aftermarket trade association, did not sign either the LOI or the CASIS accord, preferring to pursue proposed Right to Repair legislation, Bill C-273. At this time, the proposed bill and recent developments are scheduled for review this month by the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology. Whether the C-273 moves beyond this committee or not is uncertain now.

AIA has sent Minister Clement a letter dated Sept. 28, 2009, that expresses concerns, primarily that AIA was excluded from the negotiation process and that the agreement doesn't go far enough. Omitted from the letter (and from the many public and trade news stories following the announcement) is that AIA left the negotiation process of its own volition some time ago, preferring legislation. The organization re-entered the process during the summer after the LOI had been signed. At an August meeting, its suggestions and request were considered but rejected. All the industry participants as well as the above three federal government organizations are aware of this. But the public isn't. Now perhaps, like me, you're thinking, “NASTF … Déjà vu.” The parties are different yet similar, and the parallels to the NASTF process are like an echo.

Who sold out truth?

Let me share what really bothers me here. My dad was a mechanic in Canada. I learned firsthand how hard you all work and that it isn't so much about the money as it is about your hearts. You just care. I respect that more than I can

ever say in words.

Today, I am an automotive trade journalist – not by education so much as by desire and choice. Fortune graced me by putting two fine, ethical souls on each of my shoulders – two trade magazine editors – who instilled and guided me in covering our industry.

“Truth matters. Double-source all sides. Be fair and balanced. Do what’s right for the readers, regardless of how advertisers might react. Tell readers what they need to know, even if it isn’t what they’d like to hear.” These weren’t just words; they were mantra.

Today, truth has been uprooted, eroded and subjugated to special interests. Spin is in, traditional editorial standards be damned. News has become instant, caught in the riptide of an exploding Internet – where blogs, forums, instant tweets, viral rumors and press releases have become gospel, masquerading as truth and sad substitutes for quality journalism. There are deadlines to meet, and the next story to greet. Finances are tough. Who cares about the facts? Stoke the mudslinging … it’s fodder for the next juicy headline.

As I read about CASIS, I was dismayed at how newspapers, organizations, associations and even automotive trade publications were reporting the story. Thoroughness, important details and sound research were kicked to the curb. So, I wrote a news story covering CASIS for a soon-to-be-released publication. I read the agreement, not just the press releases. I listened to the Industry Canada press conference, but phoned and corresponded with other people, too. I rooted spin and disparaging comments from the tapestry, to find the truth within. When faced with omissions and half-truths, I dug for the missing pieces.

If your news source was your parts supplier, could you count on it for quality?

My point here is that you folks in the service and repair industry deserve to be accurately informed about the forces and issues that affect what you do. Yes, you’re busy. But while it might be OK to hear the “quick and dirty” about most things, you deserve the whole truth and nothing but the truth, especially when it affects your livelihood. If you receive and act on anything less than that about the critical issues, it’s a recipe for ruin.

You folks matter to me. You ought to matter to those you rely on. Not just by the words written and spoken, but by actions and follow through. You are too darned important to be misled by any person, organization, association or trade publication. Being complete, thorough and honest with you about relevant issues that could impact you is essential. It’s no different than the services you provide everyday to your customers. You give your customers the whole truth so they can make the decision they feel is best for them. Don’t you deserve the same courtesy?

Bob Chabot is an automotive writer based in Bedford, Texas. He is also the editor of the quarterly NASTF e-News electronic newsletter, as well as Techs4Tomorrow.com, an online publication devoted to aspiring technicians still in school. He can be reached at bchabot@techs4tomorrow.com.