The installer's view

By Bob Halverson



Q: The battery in my car is five years old now. How long should I trust it? Should I replace it now, or wait for it to not start the car?

A: Most batteries have a tag on the top that gets punched out when the battery is sold new. This will tell you the month and year that the battery was put in your car. At five years, you have used up most of that battery's life. But it may have a lot of life left.

The only way to tell is to have it tested. We do this during a starting and charging system test. The newer battery testers can actually measure the "Cold Cranking Amps" (CCA) that the battery has left. This is then compared with the CCA that the battery had when it was new (usually printed on the top of the battery). For instance, if the battery was rated at 700 CCA when it was new, and it now has 610 CCA, it probably has several years left. But if it is down to 400 CCA, it is getting close to the end of its life.

The other thing you have to consider is how much of an inconvenience will it be if it does fail. If your job has you commuting a long distance, it would be a big pain if your car wouldn't start some evening. Or if you worked third shift somewhere. Or if you usually had a carload of kids. Then, you would probably replace your battery a little sooner. On the other hand, if you don't live far from work, or someone could easily give you a jump-start or a ride, then you could get the last year or two out of your battery. You know that the ambulances, police cars, and emergency response vehicles don't wait for their batteries to fail!

A weak battery can not only leave you stranded, it puts a greater load on your alternator, as it is constantly trying to charge up your weak battery. This can shorten your alternator's life, too

Remember, there are two ways to replace an old part: before it fails or after it fails. Before it fails is usually the most convenient.

Q: Once or twice a week, my truck will act up. When I turn the key to the "run" position, all the warning lights on the dash light up normally, but when I turn the key to crank it over, nothing happens. When I took it to the shop, it started every time for them. How can we find out what is wrong with it when it doesn't act up?

A: If you watch very closely when it acts up, you may be able to give them more clues to the cause. Some vehicles have an anti-theft system that will prevent the vehicle from starting if it "thinks" the vehicle is being stolen. In that case, the anti-theft light will flash or stay on. Check your owner's manual to see if your vehicle has this, and how the light is supposed to work.

It could also be something else. The first thing I would recommend is to clean the battery terminals very well and test the battery. We see a lot of GM side-terminals where there is corrosion inside the terminal where it is difficult to see. These don't get cleaned very well most of the time. If there is corrosion between the terminals and the battery, it can cause an intermittent connection that will keep your car from starting.

If the battery and terminals are good, I would recommend doing a voltage drop test on the rest of the starting circuit. In that test, we look for a drop in voltage as the current flows through each component or connection, and it can usually pinpoint a bad ignition switch, starter relay, or neutral switch in the starter circuit. If the voltage reaching the starter is sufficient, it may have a starter that is getting weak. This can show up in a test of the starter's current draw while cranking. Testing must be done to prevent replacing unnecessary parts that won't fix the problem.

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