

# Auto Sunday

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## Improper or old fluid can hinder transmission

**Q.** In a recent column you stated that a rental vehicle you were driving would shudder when the vehicle shifted from first to second gear on light acceleration. This seems to be what happens in our 2005 Honda Pilot. On fast acceleration the transmission shifts normally. Would this vehicle also need a computer update?

**A.** I had one of my technicians check into whether there was a Computer Reflash fix for the shifting complaint on your Honda. He did not find any Flash Updates relating to the transmission on your car.

I would like to suggest a couple of possibilities. If you recently had the transmission fluid changed, it is possible that the wrong fluid was used. If the wrong fluid is used, especially on a Honda, it will not shift properly. The second idea would be that the transmission fluid is dirty and worn out. Deteriorated transmission fluid can cause poor shift quality and wear your transmission prematurely.

If neither of these ideas relate to your situation, a technician will have to determine if the problem relates to an electrical or a mechanical problem.

### Fluid exchange

Today's automobile is a complex combination of mechanics and electronics, and as a result the fluids that are used in these newer vehicles are more sophisticated and varied.

From specialized coolants to synthetic transmission fluids and full synthetic motor oil, it is very important that the proper fluids always be used when adding or changing the different fluids in your car. Always check your owner's manual to be sure you are using the correct fluid.

Your service provider will also be able to advise you on what kind of fluid your specific vehicle and component uses.

Let's take engine coolant for instance. It used to be you could run down to the gas station and buy a gallon of the green-colored antifreeze and it went into every car on the market. Not so today. There are several different kinds of engine coolant on the market and it is very important you use the right one.

The other part of this is most of these coolants can't be mixed because they can react and gel up in the cooling system.

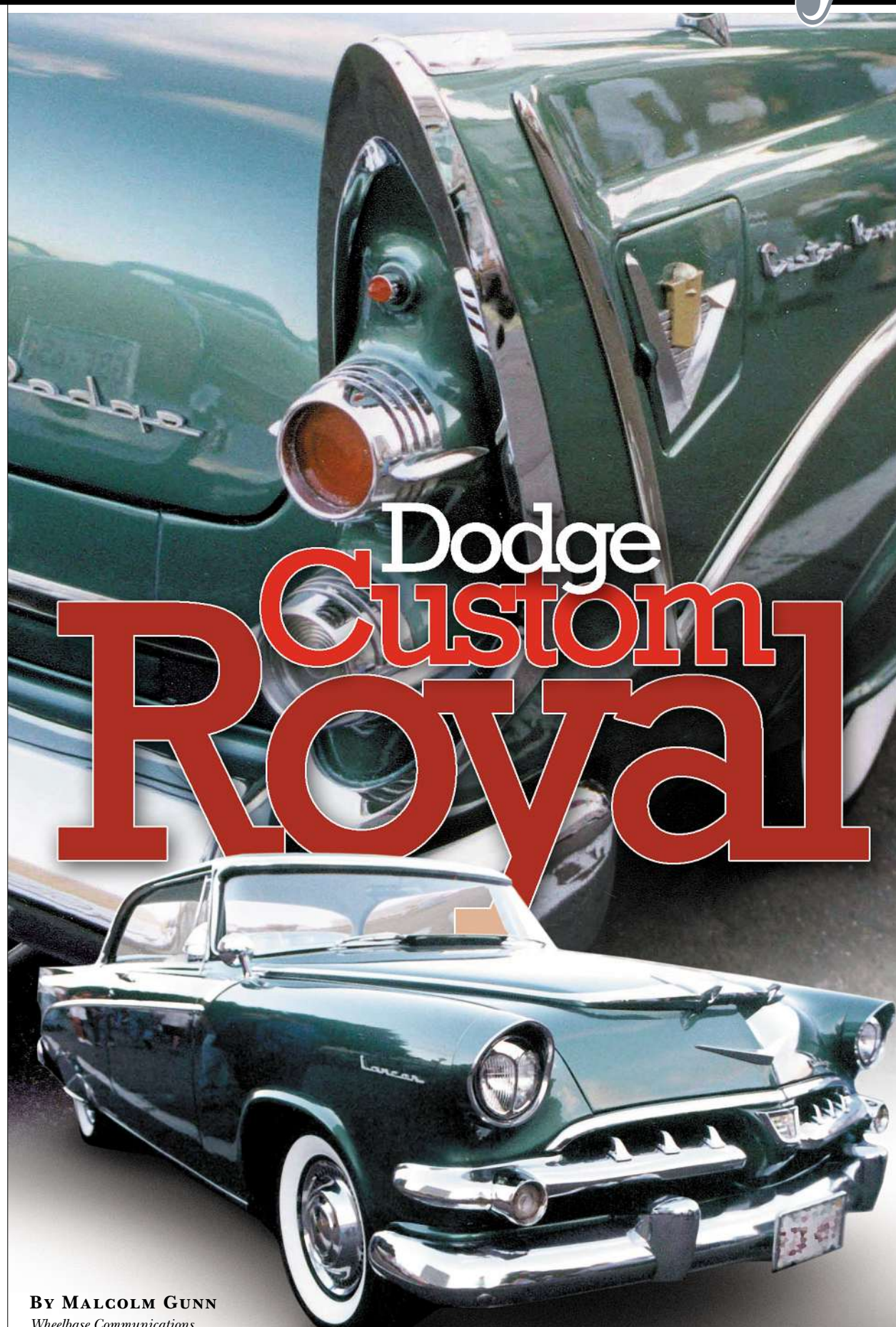
As engines get more sophisticated and are trying to eek out more miles to the gallon, you are seeing more and more vehicles require full synthetic engine oil.

The other change we are beginning to see is the pushing out of oil change intervals to 4,000, 5,000 and even 10,000 miles. If you are one to let your oil change interval stretch out more than the 3,000 miles, I recommend you either use synthetic oil or at least a synthetic blend. Most of your better shops are using a synthetic blend motor oil in their standard oil change.

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Doug McAllister  
Under the hood



## Dodge Custom Royal

BY MALCOLM GUNN  
Wheelbase Communications

For the company founded by Walter Percy Chrysler, the years 1955 and 1956 were pivotal. A revolution was brewing within the organization that would eventually lead to major changes in both the style and substance for Chrysler's automobiles.

The 1956 Dodge Custom Royal is representative of the direction the company was headed: fins; flash; and fast times.

Although the fact that the car isn't particularly well known is not necessarily a case of the wrong product at the wrong time, but, perhaps, an indication that every other manufacturer was heading down the same road.

At the beginning of the decade, Chrysler was solidly entrenched in third place in domestic sales, lagging behind General Motors and Ford, but well in front of Hudson, Nash, Kaiser, Packard and Studebaker. Its passenger-car lineup, consisting of Chrysler, DeSoto, Dodge and Plymouth, was generally regarded as dull and dowdy, appealing to older drivers. Youthful buyers were attracted to sleeker Fords and Chevrolets.

A Chrysler rebirth was needed and the man who was enlisted to pull it off was Virgil Max Exner. Ex, as he was known to his associates, had signed on in 1949 after successful stints with Pontiac and Studebaker. By 1953, he had been elevated to director of styling, a position he would hold for eight years.

Of course new looks aren't much good without new power to match. At the time, most Dodges and Plymouths, the company's bread-and-butter brands, made do with versions of an ancient, underpowered L-head six-cylinder engine developed during the Great Depression.

V-8s finally arrived in limited quantities on certain Dodge models in '53 and with Plymouth two years later. Of course, if you had the bucks, you could spring for a top-grade "Hemi"-powered Chrysler or DeSoto with enough blood-draining torque to keep you pinned to your seat whenever you floored it.

With Exner calling the shots, by 1955 every model in Chrysler's stable was given "The Forward Look."

### Fine Lines

1956 Dodge Custom Royal

Conservative, understated sheet metal was replaced by low-slung, chrome-trimmed flanks featuring wraparound windshields and two- and three-tone paint jobs. Additionally, Chrysler and DeSoto began to sprout tail fins, a sign of much bigger things to come.

Mechanically, the '55s were also changed, with the emphasis on across-the-board oomph. For the first time, Chryslers and DeSotos only came with V-8s under the hood, while the venerable L-head six was relegated to the Dodge and Plymouth ranks. On top of the performance heap was the Chrysler C-300 (not 300C as most people think), the first of the famed "letter" cars, named for its 300-horsepower Hemi (short for hemispherical-shape combustion chambers) V-8.

As Chrysler Corp. came to rely more on V-8 power, the bigger engines began to find their way into the economy ranks. All Dodge models featured an optional 270 cubic-inch unit with up to 193 horsepower on tap, and Plymouth, once the company's barebones brand, could be had with an almost-as-quick 260-cube powerplant worth up to 177 horsepower.

Another distinguishing trait of Chrysler cars was the dashboard-mounted automatic shifter, an elegantly designed chromed lever that made column-mounted systems seem ancient by comparison.

The changes were beginning to pay off. In just 12 months, market share grew to 17 percent, up from 1954's 11 percent.

When the 1956 cars were introduced, Chrysler was hoping for more of the same. Exner and his design team placed larger fins on both Chryslers and DeSotos and also stuck them onto Dodges (such as the pictured Custom Royal) and Plymouths. A new four-door hardtop was available from all four divisions (five, if you count Imperial, which had been spun-off from

Chrysler a year earlier).

On the horsepower front, the '56 Chrysler 300-B's Hemi engine produced up to 355 horsepower, while DeSoto's new Adventurer two-door hardtop packed a nearly-as-impressive 320 ponies. Dodge unleashed its D-500 with a 315-cubic-inch V-8 that set 196 speed and endurance records at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah. Although available on any model, it frequently found its way inside the Custom Royal.

Commenting in his book, "Glory Days," automotive advertising and marketing guru Jim Wangers writes: "The most interesting thing about each of these cars was that, taking horsepower and weight into consideration, Chrysler was actually marketing the first true muscle cars almost 10 years ahead of their time."

Other Chrysler developments included yet another unique automatic transmission shifter. The dashboard-mounted unit gave way to buttons, attached in a pod next to the speedometer. Both the two-speed PowerFlite and newly developed three-speed Torque-Flite automatics featured push-button operation.

Whether it was the unusual push-button selector or the win-at-all-costs marketing tactics by Ford and GM, the fact was that, in 1956, Chrysler sales fell off a cliff. Originally, these models were to carry over into 1957. However, as a stopgap measure, Virgil Exner's (some would refer to him as "Virgil Excess") radically redesigned 1958 replacements were rushed into production a year early.

Although wildly popular at first, the nearly complete lack of quality control — the result of introducing them to the public before they were really ready — eventually tarnished the corporation's "Forward Look" image.

But, in their mid-1950s heyday, when horsepower was king and glitzy shapes and colors brought buyers scrambling into showrooms, Exner's increasingly lavish creations combined with Chrysler engineering to produce nothing less than automotive magic.

## Cadillac's SRX given better fit to challenge mid-size SUVs

BY ANN M. JOB  
For The Associated Press

Cadillac's smaller sport utility vehicle, the SRX, is finally downsized enough to warrant the "smaller" label, and for 2010 seats just five people. The SRX's V-8 and rear-wheel drive platform also are gone.

The updates make the 2010 SRX better able to compete with the top-seller in the luxury, mid-size, crossover SUV segment — the Lexus RX 350. In fact, Cadillac set the starting price tag for the new SRX some \$7,000 less than last year's larger, seven-passenger model and in the process undercut the Lexus substantially.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is \$34,155 for a base, five-passenger, front-wheel drive SRX with 265-horsepower, direct injection V-6 and automatic transmission. The starting retail price for a 2010 RX 350 with seats for five, front-wheel drive, a 275-horsepower V-6 and automatic transmission is \$38,500.

Base SRX and RX 350 models don't have leather-trimmed seats but come standard with floor mats, two-zone climate control and power windows and door locks, among the amenities. Still, the base RX 350 has more standard features than the base SRX, including power-adjustable front passenger seat.

And some items that are offered as options for the base RX 350, such as rearview monitor, are listed as "not available" on the base SRX. So, buyers must move up to pricier trim levels of SRX to get rear sensors or rearview camera.

The big base price difference also doesn't necessarily apply to buyers looking for all-wheel drive. An all-wheel drive 2010 SRX has a starting MSRP, including destination charge, of \$40,230, while a 2010 RX 350 with all-wheel drive starts at \$39,900.

Cadillac has a ways to go to catch the RX 350, which posted U.S. sales of 93,379 in calendar 2009 compared with SRX sales of 20,237.

But the newly sized SRX offers something the Lexus RX arguably doesn't have — edgy styling.

Like Cadillacs in recent years, the SRX has sharply creased sheet metal outside with a bit of a pointy nose and vertical, fin-like taillights. It's a look that's all Cadillac and will not be confused with any other luxury brand.

Inside, the new SRX gets a dashboard layout and controls akin to those in the Cadillac CTS sedan. The plastic is nicely textured and doesn't look or feel cheap, and knobs and buttons are easy to understand. A space-age item is the color display that rose automatically out of the top of the dashboard of the test car and showed the optional navigation system map and other features. It drew passengers' attention right away.

No longer on a rear-wheel drive platform, the front-wheel drive SRX is a bit narrower in width and shorter in height and length than its predecessor. The changes make the SRX closer to the RX 350 in size, although at 15.8 feet in length bumper to bumper, the SRX still is 2.5 inches longer than the Lexus.

The SRX is heavier, too, though it's less weighty than it was last year with its 303-horsepower Northstar V-8. The heft was noticeable in the test SRX as doors closed solidly and the vehicle, with optional 20-inch wheels and sport suspension, moved with purpose on the roads.

In fact, I wondered sometimes if the V-6 was going to provide the acceleration I was looking for, because at times, a slight nudge on the accelerator didn't seem to produce a noticeable response. So, I'd mash on the gas pedal to get moving quicker, and then I didn't get the slight, precise speed adjustments that I wanted.



ASSOCIATED PRESS/Courtesy of Cadillac  
Cadillac has downsized the SRX for 2010, eliminating rear-wheel drive models and the V-8 engine.

### At a glance

Price as tested: \$46,015

Engine: 3-liter, double overhead cam, direct injection V-6 with VVT

City/highway fuel economy: 18/25 mpg

Length: 190.3 inches

Wheelbase: 110.5 inches

Curb weight: 4,224 pounds

Built: Ramos Arizpe, Mexico