

What to know about battery testers

Find product information and details on how to stock and sell the right digital battery testers.



By Phil Sasso Contributing Editor

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Q. What's changed in battery testers?



A. I'll assume you know nothing about batteries or battery testers. Don't be insulted. I thought I knew a little something about modern batteries and battery testers before I researched this column. Turns out I knew next to nothing.

The lesson: technology sometimes changes much faster than you realize, so never assume and keep learning.

Today's battery doesn't look much different than the battery in the '72 Chevy I worked on as a teen in my parents' driveway. In fact, they still use the same basic lead acid science invented by French physicist Gaston Planté in 1859. But there have been many, many major advances over the past 150 years to where we are with today's flooded, absorbed glass mat (AGM) and gel batteries, and battery testing technology.

For example, when I was a teenager a battery tester looked like a turkey baster with different colored floating balls inside. This hydrometer basically tests the density of the acid in a battery.

You probably still sell hydrometers.

It's a cheap tool and still a valid test.

But hydrometers are used infrequently today: they're messy, time-consuming, and aren't very effective on AGM or gel batteries, says Jim O'Hara, director of marketing at Clore Automotive.

And it's problematic to get at the cells on a sealed battery, says Luke Tucker of EZ-Red, maker of the model SP101 hydrometer. "But, it will let you know if you have a fully charged battery or not. Also, it will point out a bad cell if one of the cells shows a significantly different reading than the others."

A hydrometer is a great tool if you're going to fix a battery. But the labor cost of fixing a battery usually makes it more practical to replace a battery, says O'Hara.

Today, the tester of choice in most technicians toolboxes is a digital battery tester. The technology behind the

Briefing on different types of battery testers

CARBON PILE LOAD TESTER

A carbon pile tester basically tests a battery by putting it under a load for several seconds to see if it's in good condition. It's the grand-daddy of electronic testers and, to some, it's still considered the best battery test.

"This type of testing is still the 'gold standard' for battery testing and is what most battery manufacturers use for warranty purposes," says Associated Equipment's Gary Mackey.

But to use a carbon pile tester, you need to have a battery that's at least 85-percent charged, says Clore's Jim O'Hara. It's a huge waste of time to put a battery on a charger only to find it's bad, when a digital tester can tell if a discharged battery will hold a charge.

A carbon pile tester is generally at a price level that makes it a shop purchase.

TECH-LEVEL DIGITAL TESTERS

This level of digital battery testing uses conductance or resistance and special algorithms to test a battery and give back a reading in just a few seconds.

On an entry-level digital tester, the tech just enters the cold cranking amps (CCA) of the battery, says O'Hara. In a few seconds, the technician gets a decision: good, bad, charge or charge and retest. A temperature button compensates if the battery is below 32 degrees F for better accuracy. The most current digital testers have special settings for AGM and gel batteries. "

The average tech will spend from the mid-\$100's to the mid-\$300's street price for a technician-level tester.

SHOP-LEVEL DIGITAL TESTERS

These testers range around \$400 to \$900 street price, and offer full system testing and built-in or remote printing capabilities, says Midtronics' Dan Cox.

Most shop-level testers can test the battery, starter and alternator. This can help a shop sell not just more batteries but also cables, parts, starters, alternators and more to their customers.

Printers are a great add-on for the shop to show and sell more to customers. Printouts create greater trust with the customer when making service recommendations.



digital tester was created in the late 1960s by a researcher at University of Minnesota, says Dan Cox, technical support manager at Midtronics.

Depending on the manufacturer, digital testers use electrical resistance or conductance and special algorithms to determine the status of a battery's life.

Enough history lesson. Time for a sales lesson...

Q. How can I sell more digital battery testers?

A. First, realize that just because your customer has a digital battery tester doesn't mean they don't need a new one. Whether you're selling a technician or a shop owner/manager, check out if their current tester has the newest features (see the sidebar on next page for details on different types of battery testers).

Many technicians have older testers that work fine on traditional flooded batteries, but not on today's AMG, spiral or gel batteries. And there are lots of these "newer" batteries on the road.

"[There are] nearly 40 million vehicles on the road today in North America equipped with an AGM battery," says Gary Mackey, vice president of global sales and marketing, Associated Equipment Corp. "Technicians need to be trained on charging and testing this new battery technology. These batteries have been in some vehicles since 1999."

So, to sell your customers a new tester, you just need to point out how your newest models can test almost every battery coming into their work bay. I say *almost* every battery because the high-voltage batteries in hybrid and electric vehicles require a whole different type of testing equipment that I'd need a whole column to cover.

The typical shop can benefit from advanced testing and printing capabilities

SALES Q & A

For product details on different battery testers and battery service equipment, visit: VehicleServicePros.com/batteryservice

to fully diagnose problems and prevent comebacks. (Repeat business is great. Comebacks are not.)

Winter months are a big time for customers to make battery sales. So bone-up

on your battery testing products and do a strong promotional push in the months ahead. Understanding what's in your product line is key to increasing sales. The more you can tell, the more you can sell. ■



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