Replacing car keys is no longer quick or cheap

In many cases, only a dealer can help you out

By Bruce Mohl, Globe Staff  |  May 20, 2007

Car keys have come a long way, and so have their prices.

The simple metal key that could be copied at a hardware store is quickly vanishing. Taking its place are electronic gadgets that combine metal keys with computer chips that must deliver a code to the car's on board systems before it can start. Some cars, including some Mercedes-Benz models and the Toyota Prius, have dispensed with the jagged-edge metal key entirely in favor of an electronic fob.

"It's a good thing. The technology prevents car thieves from stealing the car, but the downside is that the key is expensive," said David Williams , executive vice president of the Massachusetts State Auto Dealers Association.

Dealers are charging anywhere from $80 to $350 to replace car keys these days, depending on the make and model of the car and the number of bells and whistles on the key or the key fob. Locksmiths tend to charge less, but they often don't have the codes or software needed to make duplicates for certain car models.

"There are some you can get, but there are some you can't get," said Ann Maestranzi, one of the owners of Charles W. Benton Co., a Boston locksmith. "When you can't, the dealers have a field day."

The Center for Auto Safety, a consumer group in Washington, D.C., conducted a survey last year covering 50 car models and found that the average price of a "smart key with an embedded computer chip" was more than $150, 12 times the typical dealer price for a mechanical key.
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Clarence M. Ditlow, executive director of the center, said some key systems contain unique identifier numbers that must be read by an electronic control unit in the vehicle. Others use an identifier number plus a rolling code that changes every time the key is used.

Ditlow said some car manufacturers have created a limited monopoly for their keys by not sharing the codes with independent shops. He petitioned the Federal Trade Commission to investigate fees charged by dealerships last year, but said he has received no response from the agency. The FTC declined to comment.

California last year passed a law requiring most car manufacturers to provide their key codes to licensed locksmiths. The law takes effect Jan. 1, 2008. It was sponsored by the American Automobile Association and opposed by many luxury car makers, who said it could compromise vehicle security. The law exempts a handful of manufacturers, including Mercedes-Benz, BMW, and Jaguar, until 2013.

Officials at Toyota Motor Corp. said their key codes are available to most locksmiths. The officials said the high cost of replacement keys is largely a function of the technology contained in them. They noted the average cost of a replacement key for a Prius is about $300.

The Prius system is based on technology that industry officials say was pioneered by Mercedes-Benz. The fob communicates automatically with the Prius's systems via radio waves once the owner is close to the car. The owner doesn't have to do anything to unlock the car or ignition system; the fobs work even while inside a pocket or pocketbook. A local Mercedes dealership quoted a price of $286 for this kind of replacement fob, which the company calls "keyless go" technology.

The Globe surveyed local auto dealerships for replacement key prices. Most quoted separate prices for the key and for programming it. Many said a service appointment was required and that it would take about an hour to replace the key. Several dealerships, including a Mercedes dealer, said customers need to produce a car registration and driver's license to get a replacement key.

Car owners who need another key should check prices at a dealership and at locksmiths to see if they can make the key for less.

Patty Maestranzi-Fisher, owner of Broadway Lock in South Boston, said many keys can be programmed quickly if the car owner has the original set in hand. Without those original keys, she said, the cost can run into the hundreds of dollars.

Joyelle Parent, a locksmith at Lowell Lock & Key, said she can duplicate most, but not all, keys. She said expensive equipment is often needed to duplicate the more advanced keys, and it's not worth purchasing if her volume of business isn't sufficient.

Parent estimated she could make a Ford Explorer key for about $50 to $55. Quirk Ford estimated the same key would cost $85.

John Paul, known as the car doctor at the American Automobile Association of Southern New England, said it cost him $4 to make a replacement key for his 4-year-old Kia Sorrento. He said he wasn't so lucky when he needed a replacement key for his wife's 7-year-old Volkswagen. That key cost $100.

"Losing a set of keys can turn into a pretty expensive arrangement,"
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Paul said.

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