



DIY Detailing Product “Un-Checklist”

Products That AREN'T Required To Detail Your Car:

I've had a minimalistic approach to detailing for quite a while. Wasting money on things I don't need has never really been a common occurrence for me. So when I see some of these product manufacturers making it seem like I need a shelf full of dozens of bottles just to maintain a clean car, I question it.

The truth is, detailing companies will be happy to sell you a separate product for every task imaginable. It's great business for them. And to be honest, it's totally ok if you enjoy collecting them all and having a matching set in your garage.

The most important thing is that you have **fun** detailing your car. If that means buying one of everything just to have it, I'm not going to judge you. But I'm also not going to judge my fellow thrifty folks - as a matter of fact, I'm hoping to open your eyes to a few products that aren't 100% necessary for a hobbyist to detail their car.

Here's a quick overview of the list:

1. **Pressure washer**
2. **Foam cannon**
3. **Automotive air dryer**
4. **Long throw polisher**
5. **Carpet extractor or Steam cleaner**
6. **Motorcycle/Truck specific products**
7. **Clay bar lubricant**
8. **Windshield coatings**
9. **Wash 'n Wax soap**
10. **Detail spray**
11. **Leather conditioner**
12. **Special wax for different colors of paint**
13. **UV protectant for interiors**
14. **Multi-layer ceramic coatings**
15. **Polishing pad primer spray**

Let's dive into my explanations for each:

Pressure washer

A pressure washer is a great thing to have for detailing your car. It makes it easier to remove dirt and other contaminants without having to touch the paint which is always a good thing. So why did it make my list?

While it might not be as rewarding or fun to use, the "jet" setting on a typical garden hose can accomplish nearly the same thing.

A pressure washer might still be required for really dirty vehicles but when it comes to washing well maintained cars, a hose will do the job just fine. Your washing/drying technique is far more important when it comes to avoiding scratches.

Foam cannon

Some of you are probably expecting this after that first one.

Foam. Cannons. Don't. Make Your. Car. Cleaner. Read that again!

Using a typical ph-neutral car soap in a foam cannon is not going to make dirt and grime magically disappear. If you don't believe me, try spraying foam on a panel, let it sit and "emulsify" the grime, rinse it off, and swipe it with your finger. This gives you an idea of how much cleaning a foam cannon does on its own.

Proper cleaning requires agitation and you should be using a soapy wash mitt whether you use a foam cannon or not.



With all that said, I have to admit that I own and use a foam cannon regularly. There are 2 reasons for that:

1. I like the extra lubrication when washing a super dirty or sensitive car
2. It looks cooler in photos and on YouTube

Are foam cannons fun to use? Yes. Do you need one to get your car clean without creating scratches? Definitely not.

Automotive air dryer

I don't own one of these and I probably never will. They're very expensive and inconvenient to use. I'm a big fan of blowing vehicles dry though.

You might be surprised to hear that the drying stage is often the highest risk for creating swirl marks. The surface has much less lubrication than the soapy wash stage and we're still dragging a towel across the surface.

Unless you're in a surgically clean enclosed space and you're the only human that never makes a mistake, there's bound to still be dirt or dust here and there - even immediately after washing. Blowing your vehicle dry eliminates the chance of scrubbing that dirt into the paint.

How do you blow your car dry without a fancy "blaster"? Use a leaf blower. No, the air isn't filtered or heated like a fancy blower... but guess what? Neither of those things are necessary.

The air that hits your car when you're doing 80 MPH down the freeway isn't filtered or heated either. A leaf blower works great and if you get a cordless one, it might even be safer than potentially rubbing a hose on your paint!

Long throw polisher

If you're bold enough to attempt your own paint correction, that's great. You can totally do it yourself - just make sure to learn as much as you can before ever touching your beloved paint job with a machine.

There are lots of polishers on the market to choose from. Long throw dual action polishers have become very popular in the last few years for good reason - they are indeed more effective at cutting paint.

The actual difference over a short throw polisher is marginal at best though. Yes, they're more powerful and will give you better results in less time. But using the same pad and polish combination on a short throw machine will get nearly the same result in the end, it might just take a bit longer.

For a professional that does this for a living, time is money. A long throw polisher is a great tool. But for the hobbyist detailer, a cheaper short throw machine will work great. It's also less likely to cause damage when in the hands of an inexperienced detailer.

Carpet extractor or Steam cleaner

Similar to a long throw polisher, these tools are more necessary for professionals that encounter neglected vehicles on a daily basis. If you look after your interior and clean up any spills or excess dirt promptly, you'll never need a carpet extractor or steamer.

There are very few things in an interior that can't be cleaned with an all purpose cleaner or degreaser, brushes, towels, and maybe even a scrub pad. A little elbow grease is typically all that's needed.



Motorcycle/Truck specific products

I can't help but giggle sometimes when I see the products some of these manufacturers come out with. The truth is, a motorcycle is made out of the same materials as a car. We're dealing with metal, plastic, rubber, vinyl, leather, paint, chrome etc.on both vehicles.

Cleaning a leather motorcycle seat is no different than cleaning a leather car seat. Wax that's intended to be used on cars will work exactly the same on a bike. The only thing that's different when detailing a motorcycle is that you have to avoid applying any product that will make the grips, seat, or tires slippery. That's it.

Did you get your truck dirty after an off-road adventure? Break out the pressure washer and spray the mud off. You shouldn't be relying on soap to remove dried on mud in the first place. You can always mix your regular soap up a little stronger or add a touch of all purpose cleaner if you wish.

Clay bar lubricant

Most clay bar kits that you purchase will include a bottle of clay lube. It's totally fine to use that if you want to. But when it runs out, do you need to run to the store immediately to replenish your stock? Nope.

You can use soapy water, spray wax, detail spray, or a rinseless wash product to lubricate your clay bar. The important thing is that it creates a slick surface and is easy to wipe off after. That's all that matters!

Windshield coatings

Ultra hydrophobic windshield coatings can do a great job of repelling water and helping visibility in bad weather. I enjoy using them myself, but once they wear off, I'm more likely to reach for the spray wax or paint sealant rather than a fresh application of an expensive coating.

Let's remember that your windshield already has hydrophobic properties. As long as your wipers aren't worn out, you'll be able to see fine when it's raining hard. A windshield coating can improve visibility and extend the life of your wipers, but it isn't required.



Wash 'n Wax Soap

These products make bold claims about being able to clean and protect your paint all in one step. Realistically, how much protection can be left behind in soap residue? Is it possible that manufacturers are adding a drop of wax to their car soap and making it seem like you're protecting your paint by using it?

I would much rather wash my car with regular soap and spend an extra 15 minutes applying a quick coat of actual wax or sealant. That'll do a much better job and last a lot longer too.

Detail spray

Now, I don't have anything against using detailing spray. There are plenty of legitimate uses for it. But much like clay lube, you don't necessarily have to immediately buy more as soon as you run out.

You can use other products like spray wax, drying aids, SiO₂ toppers, and rinseless/waterless wash for the same purpose. I have a bunch of bottles of detail spray sitting in my garage that I never use because I tend to use whatever is already in my hand at the time.

Leather conditioner

I have no problem with modern products that are meant to protect coated automotive leather. But those old school leather “conditioners” that claim to feed the hyde of coated leather are going to do much more harm than good. They do nothing more than sit on top of the surface, causing it to be greasy and actually attract dirt and dust (which in turn, will cause your leather to wear more).

It's important to care for your leather by keeping it clean and avoiding sliding across the high wear portions of the seat. Feel free to apply a product to prevent dye transfer and make them easier to clean but there's no need to condition anything.

Special wax for different colors of paint

Your carnauba wax has no idea what color your paint is. If you apply it to your car, it'll make it slick and glossy - that's all there is to it. If you replaced your red car with a white one, there is no need to purchase a new wax for it.

UV protectant for interiors

The materials in modern car interiors already have UV inhibitors built into them. So whether or not you apply a vinyl protectant isn't going to make much of a difference in the chances of your dash cracking.

It might not hurt to boost your vinyl with some extra protection, but it certainly isn't required. Wiping your interior down with a damp towel will get the dust off without adding any extra shine or gloss. If you're concerned about the sun's UV rays, you're better off blocking them with window tint, a sun shade, or a dash cover.

Multi-layer ceramic coatings

The ceramic coating industry has been full of myths right from the beginning. Remember when they used to advertise that your car won't get dirty by pouring a bucket of “mud water” on the hood? Or the classic scratch test using a lighter?

Any respectable ceramic coating company is going to require 1 layer of application. Some might recommend adding a 2nd layer of a different coating to boost the water behavior and shininess but that's it.

If a company is telling you that 11 layers of their coating will last the lifetime of your vehicle, they're lying. What they're actually selling you on is their maintenance program where they check up on and reapply the coating whenever needed.

Polishing pad primer spray

Oh boy, did I ever save the best for last! This one really annoys me. Your polishing pad should be primed with the polish or compound you're using, not whatever they're putting in that spray bottle. It'll spread throughout the pad on its own.

They might tell you that your polishing pad won't be lubricated if you don't use their primer spray. That's EXACTLY what you want! The whole idea is to abrade and cut the paint when you're polishing. Trying to make your pad glide on top of the surface rather than biting in makes no sense at all.



Hopefully this list has helped you to figure out where you can save money while building up your detailing arsenal. Remember that your technique is almost always more important than the product you use.

So make sure to educate yourself on auto detailing as much as possible and focus on building your knowledge rather than your bottle and tool collection.

Happy detailing my friends!

-Tim