

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2008

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A Do-It-Yourself Facelift for the Car

We Test At-Home Kits To Repair Paint Scratches

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Even the tiniest scratch on a car can lead to rust, and the loss of hundreds of dollars in the value of your ride.

But it can be inconvenient and costly to leave a car at the body shop: Recent research by IBIS World found that auto repair shops in the U.S. do about \$35.6 billion of business a year, and about 26% of that is paint repair. To see if we could avoid taking our car into the shop, we tested five car scratch-repair kits, all available online and in some specialty stores. One kit -- Dr. ColorChip -- included paint to match our car. Another retailer, Paintscratch.com, sold matching paint separately. Two others required us to buy paint independently, and one, Simoniz Fix It!, didn't require its product to be used with paint at all. All the products were designed to tackle scratches, not dents and dings.

The first kit we tested was the Scratch Kit and a 24-ounce can of spray paint from Paintscratch.com, which has an easy-to-use chart where you can plug in your car's year, make and model and pick out the right paint color. The Scratch Kit includes a can of clear lacquer liquid compound to use with the paint, a bottle of acrylic lacquer thinner and a wax and grease remover for cleaning the area before working on it. Unfortunately the box also included Styrofoam packing peanuts, and because we were working with chemicals we opened it in a well-ventilated area -- a windy front yard. The peanut cleanup added an extra 20 minutes to the task.

An index-card-sized piece of paper was included with instructions for checking the paint color by coating the back of the card, which we duly did. Happily the paint appeared to be the right color, but unhappily the URL for the complete instructions for use was on the other side of the card so we had to

wait 15 minutes for it to dry to look them up.

The instructions were extremely good, but after several practice runs on a cardboard box, we found the spray can pretty messy. A lot of spray came out very quickly and it was hard to control the flow, so we resorted to spraying the paint onto a plate and painting it over the compound with an unused eye-shadow brush. The results were good, and the scratches were much less noticeable after the clear lacquer dried. Paintscratch.com also offers paint pens, which might have been a better option for us.

The next kit, Quixx Two-Step Repair Kit, required us to set a password to order online, but this was quick and simple to do. The kit included sandpaper for evening out paint around scratches, two compounds to use on small and deep scratches, and a soft cloth for polishing. Quixx doesn't sell automotive paint. The compounds for small scratches easily removed white scuff marks, giving the car an immediate facelift, but the instructions for deeper scratches -- to fill with paint, let dry, then sand with wet sandpaper and polish -- just rubbed the new paint out of the scratches and made the imperfections more noticeable. Sanding first, applying the compound and painting last worked much better but still left an uneven paint finish.

Langka Paint Chip Repair Kit arrived with a micro-fiber cloth, prepaint solution to clean the scratch, a sealant to finish the repair, and the Langka Blob Eliminator solution for removing excess paint. It also contained a blue piece of plastic the size and shape of a credit card to use in conjunction with the cloth and the Blob Eliminator. The card turned out to be the missing link that would have helped the Quixx kit too. Once the paint dried, "filling" the scratch, we used the Blob Eliminator on

the cloth wrapped around the plastic card to rub over the top of the scratch, making it much less visible. After we repeated the painting, drying and blob-eliminating process three or four times the paint in the scratch built up to lessen the groove and the finish looked fairly professional. One quibble -- we had to supply our own cloth for the sealant, because the Langka cloth was small and quickly became covered in paint.

Our favorite kit, Dr. ColorChip Basic Paint Chip Repair Kit, required the factory color code and VIN number to order online, but no password. The kit included one rubber glove, five fluid ounces of paint, a small bottle of Pre-Fast blending solution and what looked like an eye-shadow brush. The instructions begin "Paint! Dab! Remove!" and incredibly, that's all we needed to do. We painted the chip with the eye-shadow brush, smeared it with our gloved finger, and then polished around the area with an old cloth. The kit is designed for use with "road rash" or little, round nicks, but the technique worked well with longer scratches, too.

The Simoniz Fix It Scratch Removal Kit was the most annoying kit to order online. There is only one easy-to-complete order form but users have to click through seven additional screens offering other products before getting to the shipping and confirmation screens. We found it quite hard to navigate without accidentally ordering the "free" bonus Simoniz Turbo Vac that required an additional \$12.95 in shipping and handling.

The Simoniz Fix It! Scratch Removal Kit contained a bottle of Fix It! scratch remover for cars, Fix It Metal Polish for household appliances, a soft green micro fiber polishing cloth and a plastic buffer that came with AA batteries and two foam buffing heads that looked like spinning marshmallows. The kit didn't

come with any instructions, but both the Web site and the car-scratch-remover bottle indicated that a nickel-sized amount should be applied to the scratch using the cloth or the buffer, rubbed in and polished. Adding paint wasn't mentioned. Although using the buffing tool made us feel very professional, we could not see any difference to any of the scratches after using the formula, no matter how long we buffed. Fix It! didn't even remove white scuff marks that wiped away easily with Quixx. The Web site claims the "magic" has millions of microscopic polishing agents, but marks on both the test car's dark-colored paint and a different, light-colored car remained unchanged.

Fix It! comes with a 30-day money-back guarantee, but only for unopened products.

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