

A day in the life of a car photographer

I had to write this up for work, and I figured it would make a pretty good blog post as well. Some may be edited from the original:

I wake up and first thing charge my devices if I haven't the day before- the handheld every time, the camera battery maybe every other time. After eating and getting ready for the day I will turn on the computer, plug the handheld into the USB port on the computer, and while waiting for the Windows mobile software I will load the web browser and go to the web site. By now the mobile software has loaded (seems to take forever, and often doesn't load so I will have to either turn the handheld off and back on or unplug and replug it into the computer), so I will click to connect without setting up the device. On the handheld, which is still on the sync screen from the last upload, I will select the right dealers and download. Back to the computer and web, I log in and one at a time go to the dealers for the day and the missing photo report page for each one. For most I have to do nothing but select print (I used to sort the list first, but have since learned that the printout is sorted by stock number even if the list on the screen is not). For my Oak Park store, I have to select all cars first. I used to only select new, but whenever Doug (used car manager) is working he stresses the priority of the used cars. I think this is unfair to Tim since he's the used car guy over there, but I can't really argue with the customer. Fortunately Doug seems to be off most Fridays.

So after syncing the handheld and printing the missing photo reports, I am ready to head out. I put the battery back in the camera if I charged it, check to make sure I reinserted the memory card the night before, then put everything in the camera bag (handheld included). I put the missing photo reports on my clipboard, then take the clipboard, bag, and printer bin (in cold weather I bring it in each night) and head out to the car. The bin goes in the trunk while the clipboard and bag go with me in the car. On to the first job. What time I leave depends on the day. Oak Park means I leave earlier because that dealer takes longer. I may only have my Elmhurst dealer on Friday so I will leave for that one after lunch to make sure more cars are ready, back from detail.

Arrival- time to walk the lot. When walking the lot I will mark off each car by the row or section it is in so I can find it again later. I generally look for stickers in the window, and at one dealer I can also check that I marked off a car on the windshield with my marker (I only got into that habit at one dealer for some reason). Of course, with this so far wet winter, checking for our mark on the windshield is difficult since snow usually covers it. After walking the lot, I will plug in at some of the dealers (in Naperville I wait until the end since the outlet is out of the way, and a couple others don't require stickers so no point plugging in until the end at these places). I will usually talk to my contact at this point to go over the list, though a couple don't really want to be bothered unless there's a question about whether or not to do a car (clean but not detailed, in a place that may indicate it is sold, damaged, etc.). After verifying the list, I will get the keys. Usually I get them all, but if there is another vendor around I may have to coordinate and share with them. Sometimes keys are out- as mentioned another vendor may have them, or a sales person, or repair. Really,

they can be with just about anyone. At sites with computerized key boxes the system may tell me who has the key, but for manual systems such as keys on hooks I am on my own. Usually I will just take what keys are there and come back for the rest when I'm done- I don't like bothering the people there unless I have to. So, with the keys on my key ring (so I don't lose any) I will fetch the first car and bring it around. Unless I am losing the light of the day and have to scramble to get the pictures done immediately, I will start with the handheld. Before starting, I need to make sure the wireless has connected to my router by clicking on the wireless icon at the top of the home screen (only screen that shows it in the handheld software) and making sure it shows my router in the wifi box. If it doesn't, I turn off the wifi by clicking in the wifi area, then turn it back on. Rarely, if it still doesn't connect (and the router is verified to be on) I will have to go to settings on the handheld, connections, and then wifi, and play around with the settings until it shows I am connected to my router. At my Naperville store I will skip this entire connection step (I may even turn wifi off and leave it that way so I am not bugged by the constant "connect to..." popups) until I am ready to print all the stickers and the invoice. So anyway, most cars are in the handheld so I can just select the right stock number (after selecting the correct dealer first on the home screen of course, then selecting the "no photos" option). For those that aren't I will check to see if the car is already there and has photos by refiltering to show all used cars, and if not I will manually add the car with the add vehicle menu item. I suppose it would be faster to just skip looking and just go right to the add item- if a VIN already exists it will find it that way and the stock number box will be filled. In this case I will jump immediately to the photos screen to see if it has photos already, marking it for restickering later if it does.

At this point I will go through the screens and adjust the mileage, make sure the correct style is selected, add the appropriate colors (choosing generic colors when I can't figure out what color the manufacturer meant- some have really odd names and sometimes there is more than one version of the color. Color codes can help, but not all manufacturers put them on the door and some of the color names are so long the color code doesn't show on the handheld), add "Cloth" or "Leather" (occasionally "Leatherette" or "Vinyl"), etc. By the way, when checking for the transmission type sometimes the field is blank. In this case, if the car is an automatic this will be a big clue that I will have to deselect "manual transmission" under the mechanical options tab and find the automatic transmission in the installed options. Once I view it and discover what "speed" the transmission is, I will quickly go back to the screen where the transmission type is and change it as oftentimes the automatic has one less than the manual. Once this is done, I will head to the options and go over what the car has, starting with exterior. A couple special notes here- often it shows that the mirrors are heated, but most of the time there is no evidence of this so I will have to deselect it and select our "power outside mirrors" option in its place. Also, if the vehicle has a power sun/moonroof, this is very often not shown on this page and will have to be added under installed options. There are others, but sun/moonroof is by far the most prevalent. Next I will look at mechanical for a couple of the options- most on this page I just have to trust the car has. Wheels (sometimes under exterior) and transmission are the biggest things here. Next up is the safety tab where I check primarily for the airbags (sometimes unchecked, probably by the dealer so in this case I leave it unchecked even if it has the airbags) and also look for "OnStar" here (usually in the interior options but sometimes shows up here). Last tab I go to is the interior options. There is so much to check here that it takes the longest. While going through the installed options, I make a mental note what doesn't show up and look for them in

the installed options. Now that the installed options show the details, I have to read them to make sure I can select them. For example, I have found that that the rear DVD system option might show that headphones and remote are included, but since these are used cars these are often **not** included as they tend to get lost so unless I see them I cannot select this installed option but instead have to settle for our own "rear entertainment" or "DVD system" option. Any options I still can't find listed I will have to go back to the appropriate tab and add our generic option. Note: some older cars have no VIN explosion so I have to painstakingly find each generic option that is listed, and even add some on the installed option screen if important enough. Fortunately most cars are new enough that they are in the handheld.

Once I finish the options, I head to the sticker screen (some dealers require pricing to be entered, but I don't serve anyone who does) and select the appropriate sticker and buyer's guide then print (unless I am at my Naperville store where I save printing until the end. If this is the first sticker at the dealer for the day I will verify the printer options and margins. Next, the billing screen where I check off the correct option before clicking done. Finished with the handheld, I turn it off, retrieve the stickers from the printer, move the car to the photo-taking spot if not already there (often I park the car by my car so I can retrieve the stickers quickly), take out the camera, and shoot the round of pictures. When it's getting dark or I am shooting indoors, especially for the interior shots I will often take more than one shot. If I can, I will lean the camera against something to keep it steady when shooting the interior. Sometimes I have to use the flash but I try not to if possible. I switch between four camera settings: P and closeup if the flash is needed, no flash and mountain if not. Each setting is useful in different situations. When shooting, I will skip any shots

that will show damage such as dents or heavy scratches. Once I finish the shots, verifying each on the camera screen and reshooting when necessary, I turn the camera off, roll up the windows, put on the stickers (taking down any if necessary- usually buyer's guides), and repark the car. I will also make note on the missing photo report of the order of the photo set- 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc and write our mark on the bottom corner of the windshield, at least at the one store I do this at. Then it's on to the next car.

Once all the cars are finished, I return the keys I have and check for any keys I didn't get the first time. I may have to ask around at this point. Then I repeat the above process for these cars. One note, at any time I may have to towel down, squeegee, brush off, or wipe off some smudges on the cars. This is all part of the service provided to the customer. Don't want any of the cheap companies to steal our customers, right? ☐ It takes longer, but is necessary. A dry summer is so much better than a wet winter...

Once finished with all cars, I will reprint any stickers for cars that have photos but are missing the stickers, put them up, and mark "reprint stickers" in the billing tab on the handheld for that car. Then I will print out two copies of the invoice- one for me and one for the customer, and see my contact to sign them. I may have to take the dealer copy to their accounting office, get a PO, or both. Once done, I exchange goodbyes, unplug, and head to the next store, or home if this was the last. At home, I will take everything in- the camera bag, my clipboard, and the printer during the winter. I may rest at this point, but before I go to bed sometime I will connect the handheld to the computer, wait for the mobile software to load again, click the button to connect without setting up on the mobile software dialog, go to the sync

screen on the handheld, and choose to upload. Once it begins I will remove the memory card from the camera and insert it into my computer. Once the explorer window pops up, I will go to the picture folder and then copy all the pictures to the folder I have set up on my hard drive by doing a ctrl-a and dragging all of them to my hard drive folder. Then I will go to that folder and start going through the pictures, saving the best of each shot and deleting the rest. Sometimes the best shot will be too dim (common for flash shots) or too bright. For these pictures I will load them into Paint Shop Pro and adjust the brightness. Rarely, I will have to adjust color- for some reason I sometimes get shots that are way too blue. I may have to crop off part of the photo if the car isn't centered properly or something undesirable shows up in the photo (like a light wire at the new Glenview store used for the indoor shots). These are the only things I will do to the photos- nothing else. Anything else can be considered unethical, like "fixing" damage. Most of the time damage will be fixed anyway by the dealer, but that is up to them. Better to just delete such photos. Anyway, getting off my soapbox, once I have gone through the photos, I will rename them according to the stock number of the car from the order I wrote down while shooting, then load up the photo uploading program. In this program I will import the pictures, then match them up for each dealer I was at during the day. Before uploading, I will verify the cars match the descriptions and that the order looks right. Then I will upload. As soon as the upload is complete I will close the program, go to the web site, close out the invoice, delete the pictures from the memory card (which I had saved up to this point in case something went wrong), safely eject the card and put it back in the camera, unplug and turn off the handheld, and if early enough charge up the camera battery (every other time unless I had a very busy day) and handheld. If there isn't enough time before I go to sleep, I will save charging for the morning.