

# Learning to install Jeep parts, accessories to tackle any task or trail

Arriving in-country ingeniously crammed into crates and stacked high in ocean-going cargo holds, the packing process aided by a fold-down windshield, World War II GI's welcomed the GP, a general-purpose vehicle admired for its multiple motoring abilities and battle-tested durability under the most frightful conditions.

Upon returning to civilian life, surplus Jeeps were mobilized for working on the farm, mud running, rock crawling and general purpose cruising – fueling a thriving marketplace for advanced comfortable-yet-rugged models and aftermarket add-ons.

“Our end-user customers come from all walks of life,” says Garrett Graubins, marketing director at Bestop, which produces Jeep soft tops and other accessories. “There are the serious, hardcore off-roaders who live to crawl over rocks. There are the light off-roaders who use their Jeeps on smoother dirt roads and trails. And there are the folks who live closer to cities who simply love the versatility and fun that comes with driving a Jeep.



“That said, there’s one thing that ties all of these people together – a love for the outdoors and, more specifically, a yearning for outdoor adventure.”

Celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year, the Jeep in all its configurations continues to blaze a trail of increasing popularity with the Wrangler leading the way. Fiat Chrysler Automobiles globally sold more than a million Jeeps in 2015 – 872,127 in the United States – setting a fourth consecutive annual sales record. The record-busting trend carried forward into 2016 when American Jeep sales exceeded 900,000 units.

Jeep owners have proven to be wildly enthusiastic about upfitting their vehicles as accessory sales and installation services remain on an upward climb. Rolled out in 2012, FCA frequently adds to its Mopar Jeep Performance

Parts show-and-go array of OEM-engineered options, including enhanced axles, lift kits, bumpers, winches, skid plates, suspension components and appearance products.

Aftermarket businesses are leveraging the Jeep add-ons category as well, driving demand for the product knowledge and installation training needed to ensure that your Jeep-loving customers are satisfied with their purchases and eager to spread word-of-mouth endorsements to their fellow enthusiasts.

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### **Thorough curriculum**

FCA's Mopar Career Automotive Program, known as MOPAR CAP, covers all the automaker's vehicles along with emphasizing Jeep repairs.

Among the current roster of 16 MOPAR CAP students at Glendale Community College in Arizona, one of 30-plus FCA-affiliated colleges in the U.S., "Every one of them is more attracted to the Jeep products than the other products in the FCA lineup," says Greg Dragiewicz, the school's program coordinator.

"Over the years many of them have participated in Jeep activities, and it's still popular" throughout the rural regions outside of the Glendale city limits. "We're very thorough" with the training, especially due to the two-year curriculum that's offered, which tends to be much more comprehensive than what a private school can provide within a shorter time frame, according to Dragiewicz.

MOPAR CAP students attend classes full-time while working part-time hours at area FCA dealership service centers. "It's a really good program for the students because they go back and forth," he says, which broadens their expertise and opportunities for advancement.

Although many Jeep add-on products are promoted by highlighting their ease of installation, suppliers within the segment are intent on providing numerous training options for shop owners, retailers and distributors along with making convenient advice available to do-it-yourselfers.

"We have a lot of Jeepers working at our company," says Henk Van Dongen, director of marketing at Omix-ADA, manufacturer and wholesaler of the

Rugged Ridge and Alloy USA brands globally distributed in more than 90 nations.

A traveling trainer arrives onsite at jobbers to display and demonstrate the various products to them and their shop customers. “When we are visiting with the different jobbers our trainer usually has one of our build-Jeeps and does on-location training on new products. Questions about installation are covered at that time. Usually we will have multiple sessions with their sales and tech teams,” Van Dongen reports.

“Similar to shops, our trainer visits with retailers as well and does a similar program,” he says. “For the DIY consumer, all our installation instructions are available online.”

Bestop’s Jeep offerings “are generally less technical to install or service than drivetrain or engine performance products,” says national sales director Jim Chick. “As such, we have no formal training curriculum.” Ample videos are available for self-training, and product experts are on duty at the company’s offices in Colorado, accessible via a toll-free telephone line and through email. A Facebook page for authorized jobbers and installers has recently been implemented for sharing professional advice.

“We look for retailers who can not only sell, but ideally install and service the end-user,” Chick explains. “In addition, we look for standout operations that offer consumers a reputable, comfortable and quality experience at their store.”

With distributors in more than 15 countries, including Mexico, several European nations, Britain, Australia, China, South Africa, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates, “Bestop vets direct international distributors based on the region, the addressable marketplace for Bestop products, regional customs or laws, and the number of existing distributors,” says Chick.

“As Jeep Wranglers find new export markets, we find qualified distributors with an excellent reputation to extend our footprint,” he adds. “The surge in JK platforms worldwide has made this the most popular Wrangler to accessorize with Bestop products.”

Instructional programs tend to vary at Baja Designs, a California-based Bestop brand specializing in off-road lighting systems. “We do not typically send out an employee for face-to-face training unless the shop is local, or a

large enough retailer to justify us sending a salesperson out to train them,” says marketing manager Chris Fortunato.

“At a minimum we will send print and marketing material out to the dealer and answer any questions they may have. For larger retailers/distributors we will send out a sales person with print material and product samples,” Fortunato continues. “Once in-house, they walk them through our primary specs, selling points and protocols. Installs are generally fairly straight forward with our products – typically plug and play, or with detailed instructions – so we don’t have many install shops in need of much more information than a direct retail customer would receive.”

As for companies interested in carrying the Baja Designs lines, “If they are in California they need a California re-sellers license,” says Fortunato. “There is sometimes a bit of informal background and reference checks. Aside from that, it mostly depends on if they have an adequate storefront or e-commerce capabilities. Same goes for install shops.”

### **Battlegrounds for testing**

Sponsoring and appearing at the category’s yearlong slate of races, rallies, charity fundraisers and other gatherings are a driving force for marketing Jeep accessories, as with the Easter Jeep Safari held each April in Moab, Utah. “It’s like a family reunion, and we look forward to seeing our Jeep-loving relatives there each spring,” says Graubins at Bestop, which annually participates in more than 30 enthusiast events. “It’s also a great opportunity for us to share new product and ideas – and get feedback from people who know Jeeps and the off-road culture.”

The Easter Jeep Safari additionally serves as “a great battleground for product testing,” he points out. “Over the years we’ve taken new product out to those canyons and come back with some very important learnings to make our products even better. Nowhere can you find a more knowledgeable, die-hard, serious Jeep-loving crowd.”

Bestop has been designated as the Official Truck & Jeep Outfitter of ULTRA4 Racing for the entire 2017 competition season. Launching its sponsorship at California’s King of the Hammers race in February, “This is an excellent opportunity for us to spend more time with the Jeep and off-road communities, as well as the product experts in our distribution network,” says Graubins. Spectators, racers and industry marketers get a close-up view of the company’s latest soft tops, floor liners, seat covers, storage solutions and

other new and existing SKUs; Tuffy Security Products is also a part of Bestop's portfolio.

Greg Adler, CEO and president of Transamerican Auto Parts and 4 Wheel Parts, was behind the wheel of a souped-up Jeep clinching a class victory at March's multi-day Las Vegas-based Mint 400. Teamed with racing icon Rob MacCachren, the duo finished nearly an hour ahead of their closest competitor.

The race's founder, Del Webb, a friend of Howard Hughes, owned the Mint Hotel and Casino in Vegas and the Sahara Hotel in Lake Tahoe, Calif.; the original desert endurance trek stretched between the two resorts. A Miss Mint 400 beauty pageant, Vanna White and Lynda Carter are previous winners, is another aspect of the festivities.

"The Mint 400 has a rich history dating back to the origins of off-road racing in the wide-open Nevada desert," says Adler, reflecting on its prestige and high profile. 4 Wheel Parts sponsors a parade along The Strip featuring participating vehicles.

Purchased by Polaris Industries in October for \$665 million, the Transamerican and 4 Wheel Parts brands include Pro Comp, Smittybilt, Rubicon Express and G2 Axle & Gear.

The Transamerican/4 Wheel Parts three-pronged sales, service and manufacturing presence consists of a large network of operations, such as a 100,000-square-foot research and production facility, plus warehouses, brick and mortar centers staffed by ASE-certified technicians, mail-order catalogs and 22 consumer-oriented e-commerce sites that attract more than 2.6 million monthly visitors.