

## *Some traditional electrical components are going away, but other, more expensive components are coming along to replace them.*

**BY MIKE ANSON**

Late model import cars and trucks are fitted with electronic control units (ECUs) also known as computers, black boxes and engine brain boxes. Many vehicles are now equipped with coil packs in place of ignition distributors. So, for this month's panel discussion we started with these new, high-tech items and worked our way down to the more traditional and always profitable electrical components such as starters and alternators. Let's see what the panel has to say about the topic of electrical components.

"We do have a few ECUs on the shelf," said **Jerry Spradlin**, Spradlin Imported Car Parts, Cincinnati, Ohio. "We do get calls for them and, based on units currently on the road, I bought Honda parts. It turns out that the ECUs in the Honda vehicles rarely suffer a failure. I learned after-the-fact that when something electrical goes wrong with a Honda it's almost never the ECU.

"It turns out that in our area Mitsubishi vehicles are the ones needing remanufactured ECUs. I also learned that having a vendor do an R&R on the customer's ECU is probably the smartest thing to do. I have several suppliers that can handle the job. I have been advised that the problem is usually one little diode that burns out and that inspecting, checking and repairing the unit is a relatively quick process.

"We have just taken on the two top-selling numbers of coil packs; both are for BMW vehicles. I can't say how well they are moving because they have only been in stock for two days. This is an area I think will grow and it will also give us as import parts specialists an opportunity to show our customers how good we are. The coil packs seem to fail after five years or so," Spradlin said.

"The remanufactured distributor business is good and growing. We carry a premium line called Moto and their warranty rate is under that for alternators and starters. Setting up the inventory is costly, but retail

prices for remanufactured distributors range from \$200 up to \$350 for some European brands. We get calls for distributors for a wide variety of cars from five to 15 years old. Just for reference, the annual sales of ignition points and condensers couldn't cover a lunch tab.

"When it comes to spark plug wires we have - praise the Lord - found an excellent supplier. Karlyn offers premium quality at reasonable prices. They have an excellent catalog that includes a buyer's guide which explains the various types of connections and types of connectors required for a correct fit. They even have a cross-reference guide in the catalog. I was also impressed with the response to my initial order - they completed a 100 percent fill in just 24 hours. If a part is listed in the catalog, then they have it in stock.

"The wire sets are offered with and without looms, depending on the application, and they have the OE type spark plug connectors that are brand and model specific. Even NGK, considered to be the ultimate supplier for Japanese vehicle, doesn't offer the OE connectors and clips offered by Karlyn. They also have the MARTENS protection for BMW vehicles (spiral-wound wire over the plug wires to prevent rodents from munching on the wires) and the giant looms for the Toyota Supra. They also feature the proper Bremi connectors for European cars and the Porsche sets come with the fyrebraid protection. They also offer the special factory-style tool that is necessary for changing the spark plug wires on a 2.0-liter VW.

"We even offer the Phat and Phurious brand STI (Spark Transfer International) spark plug wire sets for the sport compact cars. These wire sets feature special boots, 10.8-mm spiral wound wires in a silicone wire that can handle up to 600 degrees. They retail for \$169.00 a set.

"This week we placed an order for new alternators for late model imports with NSA. The new alternators are price competitive with remanufactured and we don't have to deal with cores. I recall reading that

it costs 18 percent to handle the core. "However, remanufactured rotating electrical is still a big part of the business. We use Suncoast and they give us excellent quality and excellent fill rate. However, they do build to order so it takes two weeks to fill an order. We also stock Denso rotating electrical for the Asian brands and while they claim it is a remanufactured line it is not uncommon to find a new part mixed in there from time to time. Denso's warranty rate is outstanding; in one year we have only had two defects," Spradlin reported. "Replacement oxygen sensors have become big business. They are expensive and some imports require up to four of them, sometimes at \$180 each. I would say that is much better than the old points and condenser business. Distributor caps are still selling well for us." he added.

"We get quite a few calls for ECUs, but very few sales," said **Tom Crawford**, Goodman Auto Supply, Kansas City, Mo. I think they are just price shopping. Once they learn the prices I think they go to the salvage yard. I don't think anybody in town is stocking ECUs. If we do get an order it's an R&R job - we have the customer's ECU rebuilt. I think the industry is lagging behind in regard to coil packs. The part numbers are shown in the catalogs. but they don't have the product and that creates a problem. Sometimes the installer has to go to the dealer for the part and by the time everybody marks it up, the price is so high that everybody looks like a crook to the customer. "We don't usually supply remanufactured distributors until the vehicles hit the 100,000 mile mark. We sell a lot of Honda distributors because of the large number of them on the road with high mileage - there doesn't seem to be a problem with them. We also do a pretty good distributor business with the Chrysler-badged imports (Mitsubishi) and with Hyundai vehicles, but even then the vehicles are well over 100,000 miles. It's the same story with ignition modules; we sell lots of Honda unit because there are so