

Showroom Shine



Just as a quality paint job lies in the preparations, color-sanding and polishing the right way takes some time and finesse to achieve shiny results. If it's done thoroughly and in a systematic manner, the homebuilder can achieve results once limited to a handful of paint-and-body experts. Color-sanding and polishing bring out the best in a paint job, whether the paint is new or has aged a few years. Not only can minor scratches be rubbed out, but the surface is also smoothed over to a near-perfect gloss.

Throughout the procedure you must always be aware of paint thickness. This isn't so much of a problem if you have a new paint job, assuming you know that the painter applied enough paint. Even if you have a basecoat/clearcoat finish, you shouldn't take off too much clear, because the UV protection will diminish, and the base color will fade prematurely.

Also, timing is important with a new paint job. The paint needs time to cure. If you polish it too soon, it will tighten down, and you will have to buff the vehicle again, which could bring the paint down to a thin transparent film and possibly even expose the primer. With fresh lacquer, it is best to color-sand three days after painting and then let the car sit six weeks in approximately 70 degree temperatures before polishing. Polyurethane must be sanded no more than 48 hours after painting and then polished two months later. Acrylic enamel with urethane hardener is much the same as polyurethane.

As a rule of thumb, start with 1000 grit sandpaper and just break the paint down to where the orange peel is gone. You can then lightly hand-sand the painted surface 1200 grit paper again just before buffing.

If you are polishing a car that has an aging coat of paint, clean the body thoroughly. Use a good wax and grease remover and go over all surfaces completely. Working one section at a time, use 1200 grit paper on rough areas and 1500 grit on areas that are small or places where you have no idea how thick the paint is.

It is important to sand the paint before the curing process and to even the surface. This also opens up the top surface seal, allowing the chemicals, such as thinner in lacquer and isocyanates in urethane, to escape at a faster rate than if you let the surface dry prior to sanding and polishing. The accompanying photos show the step-by-step-by-step color-sanding and polishing process. Note that parts of the car have been masked off to keep the sections from becoming contaminated by the buffing sludge. The time it takes to mask off the body is brief in comparison to the length of time it would take to clean up all the buffing compound on your motor, interior, and chassis after polishing.

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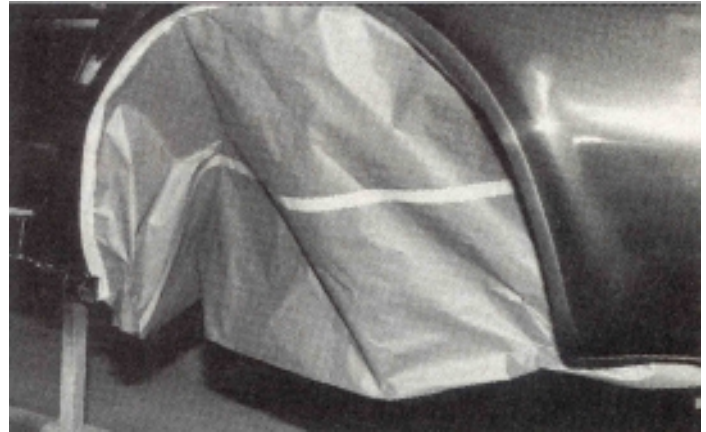
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Carefully mask off areas that are not going to be sanded and polished. Here, the engine compartment has been masked from the fender edges inward.

The wheel wells should be masked so that the underside isn't contaminated.



You will need a variable-speed electric buffer with a range of 0-3,000 rpm for proper buffing. It should be set between the 1,800 and 2,300-rpm mark for the best effectiveness. At any time you can change the speed to get into small areas.

You will also need a bucket of water, clean rags, and a flexible sanding block with 1,000-grit color sandpaper.





This is the proper technique for colorsanding. Hold the block flat and always have a damp, clean cloth nearby to keep the work area wet so that the paint will not build up on the paper. Check your paper every 20-30 strokes for buildup. When you see small traces of paint or clear sticking to the surface, turn to a new side or get a new sheet. Determine how many strokes it will take to remove any orange peel and try to use that same count on the rest of the body.

Don't use a block when sanding taillight edges and other tight spots. Maintain an even but gentle pressure with your hand or finger. Because of the highs, lows, and sharp edges of these areas, you could easily go through the paint here if you don't take care.

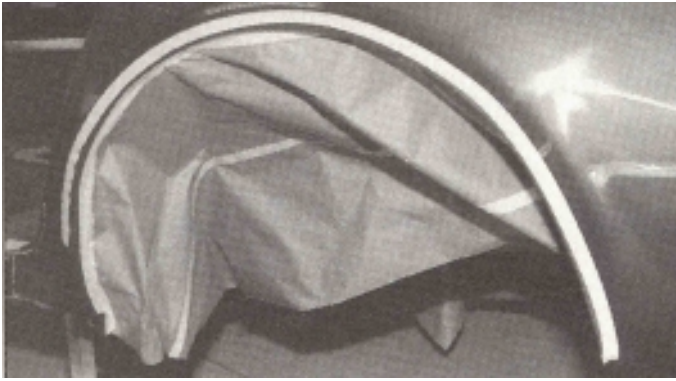


When working on the wheel well edge, you must be careful not to hit the upper or lower edges. If you are very skilled, you may be able to use the sanding block in these areas. If not, then use one finger and paper.

Some areas of the car need to be polished by hand because a buffing wheel will burn through the edges. A new piece of cheesecloth with a small amount of polishing compound works best. Rub the compound into the rag. More applying it to the body.



Here is the edge of the wheelwell being polished by hand. Four fingers together work well. Then take a clean polishing cloth and buff out the area to a high shine while removing any remnants of compound sludge.



When you've accomplished the handpolished areas and are ready to tackle the main body, tape up those edges you have compound-sanded and polished.

Apply a small amount of compound and, with a 3M Super Buff twosided buffing pad, begin the polishing process. Move the buffer around initially to spread out the compound to avoid slinging it around and also to work it in more evenly.



The buffer is set at about 1,800 rpm, but it needs to be slowed when working closer to edges. Buff the contour area of the panel. Although you hold the buffer flat to the panel, the buffing pad must be held up slightly to allow the buffer to work properly. Lift the edge in the direction you are buffing. Take it slow and easy and try to cover only about 1-squarefoot areas at a time. Run the buffer for about 4 seconds per foot on lacquer and around 7 seconds per square foot an urethane. If you move it too quickly, you won't get an efficient cut. Move it too slowly, and you may burn the finish.



When all the buffing of the large areas is complete, wipe them down with a clean cloth, then stand back and sight down along the side of the panel. Mark any imperfections in the same direction that the imperfection goes.



Here is a . fender with some imperfections. Mark them in the direction of the flutter, or orange peel. You must buff in the opposite direction to properly remove them.

Using 1,200-grit sandpaper, go against the grain on those areas you marked. Work just hard enough to remove the marks and only go about 30-40 strokes at a time between buffings. This also goes for cars that have already been polished and painted years ago. After you have completed all the sanding, you can remove the tape from all the edges on the body.



Use Finesse-It white polish or a similar product and a new two-sided polishing pad. Squirt on a small amount and work it into the pad. At 1,800 rpm, smooth out the compound. You can get close, but do not hit the edges. When you feel as if it is polished correctly, you should be able to see your reflection looking as it does in a mirror.