

AI for Mobile Detailing Businesses

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Chapter 1: Map Your Real Profit Per Job Before You Automate Anything

Here is the hard truth that most detailing content will not tell you: automation applied to an unprofitable business makes you lose money faster. If your \$200 full detail actually nets you \$38 after chemicals, fuel, water, insurance, payment processing, and the drive time you never counted, then booking twice as many of them with a slick AI scheduling system just means you are exhausted twice as fast for a number that still does not pay your rent.

So we start here. Not with ChatGPT prompts. Not with a review-response bot. With arithmetic. This chapter is the least exciting one in the book and the most valuable, and if you only read one chapter of these eight, read this one and skip the rest.

I am going to walk you through building a job-level profit model that takes maybe two hours to set up and then runs itself. We will use AI to do the parts AI is genuinely good at — reading messy data, spotting patterns in text, doing repetitive calculations without complaining — and we will do the parts AI is bad at ourselves, namely knowing what actually happened in your van last Tuesday.

Why Detailers Are Systematically Wrong About Their Own Numbers

Mobile detailing has a specific accounting blind spot, and it is different from the blind spot a shop-based detailer has. A shop owner sees a rent invoice every month. It is painful and it is visible and it forces them to think about utilization. You do not have that. Your "shop" is a vehicle you already owned, or one you financed and mentally filed under "truck payment" rather than "cost of doing business." Your overhead is diffuse, which means it is invisible, which means you undercount it.

Here are the specific ways it goes wrong, in rough order of how much money they cost the average operator:

- **Drive time is treated as free.** It is not free. It is the single largest hidden cost in mobile work. If a job pays \$180 and takes three hours of labor plus 70

minutes of round-trip driving, you did not earn \$60/hour. You earned about \$42/hour before any other expense, and that is before you count the fuel.

- **Setup and teardown are not counted as labor.** Unspooling hose, setting up the pressure washer, filling the tank, prepping the interior with towels and pads laid out, then reversing all of it and wiping down the van. That is 20 to 40 minutes per job for most operators. Every single job. It never shows up in anyone's "hours worked" estimate because it does not feel like detailing.
- **Chemical cost is estimated by feel and estimated low.** Almost everyone underestimates. A gallon of a good ceramic-infused soap, diluted properly, is cheap per job. A bottle of a premium coating is not. Pads wear out. Towels get ruined by a tar job. Clay bars get one or two uses. Nobody tracks it, so everybody guesses, and the guess is always optimistic.
- **Payment processing is ignored.** Around 2.6% to 3.5% plus a fixed fee per transaction on most card readers in 2026. On a \$250 job that is roughly \$7 to \$9. That is small until you realize it is roughly 4% of your actual net on a thin job.
- **Water and power are assumed to be nothing.** If you are filling from home, the marginal water cost is genuinely small — often under a dollar per job depending on your municipal rate and tank size. But generator fuel, or the wear on a lithium power bank you replace every few years, is real money spread thin.
- **Rework and callbacks are never modeled.** The customer who calls back about a water spot, a missed door jamb, or a streak on the windshield. You go back. That trip has all the drive-time and fuel cost of a real job and generates zero revenue. If you are honest, this happens on some meaningful percentage of your work.
- **Your own labor is treated as profit.** This is the big philosophical one. If you are a solo operator and you count everything you take home as "profit," you have no idea whether your business is profitable — you just know you have a job. We will separate these.

None of these is a moral failing. They are structural. The costs are spread across time and across many small transactions, and human brains are terrible at that. Computers are excellent at it. That asymmetry is exactly where AI earns its place in your business.

The Three Numbers That Actually Run Your Business

Before we build anything, get clear on what we are solving for. There are three numbers, and every decision you make should ladder up to one of them.

1. Contribution margin per job. Revenue minus the costs that only exist because you did that specific job. Chemicals, fuel, processing fees, any per-job supplies, and any subcontracted labor. Not insurance, not your phone bill, not your van payment. This tells you whether a given service type is worth selling at all.

2. Contribution margin per hour of your committed time. Take number one and divide it by every hour the job consumed — drive, setup, labor, teardown, and a fair share of the admin time it generated (the texting, the quoting, the invoicing). This is the number that should drive your pricing and your service menu, and almost nobody calculates it.

3. Weekly fixed cost coverage. The total of everything you pay whether or not you work: insurance, van payment or depreciation, phone, software subscriptions, storage, licensing, accounting. Divided by weeks. This is the number you must clear before any job produces a dollar of real profit.

Here is why these three, in this order. Number one tells you what to sell. Number two tells you what to charge and how to route your week. Number three tells you how many jobs you need before you are actually earning rather than just moving money around.

An illustrative example, so the shape of it is clear. These numbers are made up to show the method — yours will differ, sometimes a lot:

- Full interior + exterior detail, sedan: **\$225** charged.
- Chemicals and consumables: **\$14** (soap, APC, dressing, glass cleaner, pad wear, towel wear amortized, one-third of a clay bar).
- Fuel, 24-mile round trip at 14 mpg and \$3.60/gal: **\$6.20**.

- Card processing at 2.9% + \$0.30: **\$6.83.**
- **Contribution margin: \$197.97.** Looks fantastic.

Now the time:

- Drive: 55 minutes round trip in real traffic.
- Setup and teardown: 30 minutes.
- Actual detailing: 3 hours 15 minutes.
- Admin attributable to this job — the four texts, the quote, the invoice, the follow-up: 15 minutes.
- **Total committed time: 4 hours 55 minutes.**
- **Contribution margin per committed hour: \$40.27.**

That \$225 job that felt like a \$60/hour job is a \$40/hour job. And we have not touched fixed costs yet. If your fixed costs are \$520/week and you work 30 committed hours, that is another \$17.33/hour off the top, leaving roughly **\$23/hour** as the true return on your labor.

That is not a disaster. It is a real number that a real person can make real decisions with. It is also almost certainly lower than what you believe you are making right now, and that gap is where every bad pricing decision comes from.

Building the Data Capture Habit — Ten Seconds Per Job

The model is worthless without inputs, and any system that takes five minutes per job to feed will be abandoned by week three. So we make it brutally cheap.

Here is the capture protocol. You do this on your phone, in a note or a voice memo, and it takes under fifteen seconds:

At arrival, say or type: *date, customer first name, service, odometer.*

At departure, say or type: *done, odometer, price, payment method, anything unusual.*

That is it. A real entry looks like this:

"Sept 4, Maria, full interior sedan, 84,210."

"Done, 84,222, 165, card, dog hair way worse than photos, took extra 40 minutes, used most of a pet hair pad."

Two voice memos. Fifteen seconds combined. You do not calculate anything. You do not open a spreadsheet in a driveway. You just narrate.

The reason this works is that the transcription and the extraction — turning that mess into structured rows — is exactly what a language model is good at. You are the sensor. The model is the clerk. Do not do the clerk's job.

A few practical notes on capture:

- **Odometer at both ends** gives you exact mileage per job with zero effort, which handles fuel cost and your mileage deduction at the same time. If you cannot see the odometer easily, your phone's location history or a mileage app can substitute, but the odometer is more reliable and free.
- **Timestamps come free.** Your voice memos and notes are timestamped. Arrival memo to departure memo is your on-site time, automatically. You do not need a timer app.
- **"Anything unusual" is the gold.** That is where the pattern lives. Pet hair, smoke smell, tree sap, a customer who hovered and talked for 40 minutes, a gate code that did not work, a job where the water spigot was broken. Six weeks of these and you will see exactly which conditions destroy your margin.
- **Do not try to be precise about chemicals per job.** It is not worth the friction. Instead, track chemical spend monthly from receipts and divide by job count, adjusted by service type. Close enough is genuinely close enough here.

Give this four weeks before you analyze anything. Fewer than about 25 to 30 jobs and you are reading noise. This is the discipline part and there is no AI shortcut for it. The model cannot tell you what happened in a driveway it was not in.

Using AI to Turn Voice Memos Into a Real Dataset

Now the part where the machine earns its keep. You have four weeks of voice memos and scratch notes. You want a clean table.

Transcribe first. Most phones do this natively now — iOS Voice Memos has built-in transcription, and Google Recorder on Pixel devices does it live. If you typed notes instead, you already have text. Get it all into one document, chronologically, in whatever ugly form it exists.

Then hand it to a language model with a very specific instruction. Vague prompts produce vague tables. Here is a prompt that works — adapt the fields to your business:

I am going to paste raw voice memo transcripts from a mobile detailing business. Each job has an arrival note and a departure note. Convert this into a CSV with these exact columns:

date, customer, service_type, vehicle_size, odometer_start, odometer_end, miles, arrival_time, departure_time, onsite_minutes, price_charged, payment_method, notes

Rules:

1. If a value is missing, put BLANK — do not guess or estimate it.
2. Do not invent any job that is not in the transcript.
3. vehicle_size should be one of: sedan, midsize_suv, large_suv_truck, van, unknown.
4. Put anything unusual in notes, verbatim, do not summarize it.
5. After the CSV, list every row where you were unsure about a value and say why.

That last rule matters more than the rest combined. Language models will fill gaps with plausible-sounding fabrications if you let them. Explicitly instructing "BLANK, do not guess" and then asking it to flag its own uncertainty gives you an audit trail. Read that uncertainty list every time. It is thirty seconds and it catches the errors that would otherwise poison your averages.

Free options that handle this well in 2026: Google's Gemini (free tier, generous context window, good at long messy transcripts), Claude's free tier at claude.ai, and ChatGPT's free tier. All three will do this task competently. Use whichever you already have open. There is no reason to pay for this.

Take the CSV output and paste it into Google Sheets — File, Import, paste, comma-separated. Now you have a real dataset that cost you fifteen seconds per job and about ten minutes of setup.

Verify before you trust. Spot-check five rows against the original transcript. Every time you run this, not just the first time. If the model dropped a job or misread a price, you want to know before you make a pricing decision on bad data. I have seen models silently merge two jobs on the same day into one row. It happens. Check.

The Profit Model Itself — Building It in a Spreadsheet

Now we add the cost columns. You can build this by hand, or you can describe what you want to an AI and have it write the formulas for you. The second is faster and less error-prone if you are not a spreadsheet person, but you must understand what the formulas do, so we will walk through the logic.

Column: fuel_cost. Miles multiplied by your cost per mile. Cost per mile is your local fuel price divided by your van's real-world mpg — and use real-world, not the sticker, because a loaded detail van with a water tank gets meaningfully worse mileage than the EPA number. Weigh your setup honestly. A full 50-gallon tank is over 400 pounds.

Column: chemical_cost. Start with a flat per-service-type figure derived from your monthly chemical spend divided by jobs, weighted by service. Refine it later. A reasonable starting structure: express wash gets a low figure, full interior gets a higher one because of pads and towels, paint correction gets much higher because of compound and pad consumption, and coatings get their actual product cost because coating product is expensive and used in known quantities.

Column: processing_fee. Price multiplied by your processor's rate, plus the fixed fee, and zero for cash. Square, Stripe, and most mobile readers publish their rates. Look yours up rather than assuming; card-present rates differ from keyed-in and

invoiced rates, and if you are sending invoices for later payment you may be paying the higher online rate without realizing it.

Column: drive_minutes. If you did not log it, estimate from miles at a realistic average speed for your area — often 25 to 30 mph door to door once you account for surface streets and parking. Better: log it. Best: pull it from your phone's location timeline if you have that enabled.

Column: total_committed_minutes. Drive plus on-site plus your admin allowance. For admin, use a flat per-job figure until you have better data. Ten to twenty minutes per job is realistic for most solo operators once you count quoting, scheduling texts, invoicing, and follow-up.

Column: contribution_margin. Price minus fuel minus chemicals minus processing.

Column: margin_per_hour. Contribution margin divided by (total_committed_minutes / 60).

That final column is the one you will stare at. It is the honest scoreboard.

If you want AI to build this for you, the prompt is straightforward — describe your columns, your constants, and ask for Google Sheets formulas with the row references spelled out. Then check two rows by hand with a calculator. Formula errors compound silently and a single wrong cell reference can make an entire service line look profitable when it is not.

Fixed Costs — The Number You Must Clear Every Week

Contribution margin tells you what to sell. Fixed costs tell you whether you are actually running a business or slowly liquidating a van.

List everything you pay regardless of whether you work. Be complete and be honest. A typical mobile detailing fixed cost list looks something like:

- General liability insurance, and garage keepers if you have it
- Commercial auto insurance — and if you are running personal auto on a work van, understand that a claim may be denied. Talk to your agent. That is