START A BUSINESS - CALIFORNIA

How to start an auto detailing business in California

California car wash and polishing employers must register with the Labor Commissioner every year and carry a $150,000 bond; products you sell are taxable.

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1 Is detailing right for you?

Detailers clean and protect vehicles inside and out. It suits careful, patient people and can start small with a mobile setup.

2 Form the business and get a seller's permit

1. Choose a structure. LLCs and corporations file with the California Secretary of State.
2. Get a seller's permit from the California Department of Tax and Fee Administration (CDTFA) and collect sales tax on parts and merchandise.
3. Check your city or county for business licenses and zoning.

3 Car wash registration

Car washing and polishing employers register with the Labor Commissioner every year, with proof of local business licensing and a surety bond of at least $150,000 for employee wages. Self-service and automated washes whose employees only handle cashiering or maintenance are excluded.

4 Sales tax

Products you sell are taxable. Ask CDTFA how your washing and detailing charges are treated.

5 Your first steps

1. Form the business and get local licenses.
2. Get the $150,000 bond if you have wash or polish employees.
3. Register with the Labor Commissioner.
4. List your business on Nearby Car Care

Requirements at a glance

Sales tax on products; ask about services

Required - State - California Department of Tax and Fee Administration

Products you sell are taxable. Ask CDTFA how your washing and detailing charges are treated.

Labor Commissioner car wash registration and $150,000 bond

Required in some cases - State - California Labor Commissioner (Division of Labor Standards Enforcement

Car washing and polishing employers register with the Labor Commissioner every year, with proof of local business licensing and a surety bond of at least $150,000. Self-service and automated washes whose employees only handle cashiering or maintenance are excluded.

Amount: $150,000 bond

Official application: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=2055

Official agencies and links

Publication 25, Auto Repair Garages and Service Stations (June 2026)
California Department of Tax and Fee Administration
https://cdtfa.ca.gov/formspubs/pub25.pdf

Labor Code 2054 and 2055, Car wash registration
California Legislature
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=LAB&sectionNum=2055

Frequently asked questions

Do California car washes need to register?

Yes. Car washing and polishing employers register with the Labor Commissioner yearly with a $150,000 bond.

This guide is general information, not legal advice. Rules change and can depend on your city or county, so confirm with the official agencies linked below before you apply.