

Neal McKenna

PO Box 6505, Cresta Postal Station, 2118
Johannesburg, South Africa

Telephone 011-782-2869
Cell: 072-554-3561
e-mail: neal.mckenna@gmail.com



Buying a used car requires strong detective skills

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You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes, but it would help...

If it's time to buy another car and that's the terminology you're using, chances are you're not looking at something brand new. However, technically, the car you're hunting for is used, it's still "new" to you. Naturally, you have concerns about money, safety, getting taken for a patsy, finding a good vehicle quickly, and you have to satisfy your desire for a "hot" car that suits your "cool" image.

All of these feelings and concerns let's call them emotions – are valid and especially germane to used car buying. However, they can be kept in check by taking a magnifying glass to those concerns, and then conducting a thorough investigation to make sure you come out on top of the deal. Just in case those pre-buy jitters get the best of you, always remember you are the buyer and in control of the whole process.

As the 21st century dawns, buying used cars is a whole new experience. There aren't many "used cars" anymore. Today, they're all "previously-owned", "near-new" or "gently-used" vehicles. Not only do used cars have new designations, they have shiny

new images, and come with new-car-like offerings, such as warranties. Yet buying a previously-owned vehicle can be a major undertaking. Preparation is the best insurance for the optimum outcome – a successful used car buying experience.

When you reach the point of evaluating a specific vehicle, many of the basic questions have been answered already. Now it is necessary to examine the condition of that selected car against similar vehicles also available for sale. Be sure to ask a lot of questions about the car's history. This is a case where more is actually more. Ask where the car has been driven and under what conditions. Turn on the lights in sequence and walk around checking them all, including directional and brake lights. Light fixtures in modern automobiles are no longer one-dollar replacement items. Some lights can cost hundreds of dollars.

Check the horn for both sound and ease of operation. Are the wipers soft and streak-free when the washers are turned on? – And remember to check rear wipers if there are any. Tires should be worn evenly from side to side, with no ripples or scuffing. Variations in wear indicate bad components, faulty alignment or, at the very least, hard driving. Of course, worn tires will have to be replaced. A full set of decent tires will cost \$300.00 or more. Remember, all this investigation not only gives you more details but also allows more time to further contemplate the car.

Next, set aside plenty of time to test-drive each car you consider. Test drives determine everything from whether the car fits your physique to exposing poor handling and strange noises. Is the car comfortable? Can the seat be adjusted to the proper position for reaching the controls and still maintain a minimum of 10" for airbag clearance? After adjusting the front seat, sit in the back seat. Imagine loading the trunk with bags for a trip, groceries, special work equipment, or sports gear. How do the belts hook up and feel? Check for good visibility through the windows and mirrors. Parallel park the car to check for any difficulty or blind spots.

The engine should start easily, idle smoothly and accelerate without hitches. Take note of how is power affected when the air conditioning is turned on. Check transmission upshifts under normal driving. Then, get on a freeway or do an on-ramp simulation starting at 20 mph. Try an aggressive pass or simulate one by starting to accelerate from 40 mph. Get on and off the gas at a modest speed, listening for clunks that may indicate loose joints in the drive line. Listen for excessive noise with the windows and sunroof both open and closed. If the car in question passes this kind of close scrutiny, then chances are it's worth being made a member of the family.