

WHAT TO LOOK AT WHEN TEST DRIVING A USED CAR.

By: Ralph Seekins

Last week, I outlined what you should look at in a walk-around inspection of a pre-owned vehicle you are interested in purchasing. This week, I'll talk about how to perform a test drive and what you should look for.

As soon as I hop in a pre-owned vehicle, I do several checks and write down any observations I want to remember. Are there any cracks in the dashboard or other interior trim? Do the seat adjustments all work smoothly? Does the steering wheel have a tilt or telescoping feature? If so, does it work? Does the seat cushion fit properly or is it broken down? Do the visors have mirrors or lighted mirrors and do they work?

I then turn the key to the operating position while looking to see if the dashboard warning lights illuminate. Then, I start the vehicle and watch to make sure all the lights go out in just a couple moments – paying close attention to the airbag light. When starting, I also listen to hear if there is any abnormal noise or hesitation from the starter motor and listen to the exhaust system. A couple taps on the throttle gives me a quick check on fan belt operation. Once this is done, I shut the door.

Now, I check the parking brake for smooth operation. Then, I check windshield wiper operation, mirror operation, radio and CD operation, air conditioner and heater operation, and air vent operation. Also, while stopped, I shift the transmission from Park to Reverse to Drive and back to Park to see if the transmission shifts smoothly or if there is any drive-line “clunk.” If it is a manual transmission, I test to see that it shifts easily in and out of all the gears and that the clutch operates properly.

Now, I hit the road. I check the steering and brakes in the first few moments. The steering should activate smoothly with no flat spots or growling noise. The brakes shouldn't make noise or pull when activated. If the vehicle has anti-lock brakes, I do my best to test the system by finding a place where I can get up to speed and hit the brake pedal hard. I note whether or not the vehicle pulls in one direction or the other (alignment) when driving down the road or if there is any vibration (tire balance) when moving. I drive over a bumpy area to check the spring and shock absorber responses. The vehicle should not bounce more than once after going over a bump.

When moving, I check to see if the cruise control works properly and that all auxiliary steering wheel buttons or stalk switches work correctly. And, finally, I do several full throttle accelerations making note of any hesitation, rattling or pinging.

When I have finished my test-drive, I take a few moments to write down my observations and review my notes. Then, even after more than 40 years in the automobile business, I take the vehicle to one of our used car technicians for an on-hoist inspection. Here, we both check the underside of the car including the exhaust system for rust or other damage. Then, if I've noticed any abnormalities, I have the technician verify my concerns and estimate the cost to repair the vehicle to normal operating condition. I recommend you too have a trusted certified technician do a pre-purchase inspection for you on any vehicle you may be interested in buying.

No pre-owned vehicle is perfect. They all have imperfections. And even a thorough inspection doesn't mean the vehicle won't have problems in the near future. However, a careful inspection and test drive will help you identify imperfections so you can determine how much they affect the safety and value of the vehicle you are looking at.

Good luck and good shopping.