

WHAT TO LOOK AT WHEN BUYING A USED CAR.

By: Ralph Seekins

Question: A friend of mine has a used car I'm interested in buying. What should I look for when I check it out?

Answer: Good question. I've purchased literally thousands of pre-owned cars and trucks (trade-ins) over more than 40 years in the car business. Maybe the best way I can answer your question is to tell you what I look at when deciding the value of a potential trade-in.

When evaluating a pre-owned vehicle I use a custom appraisal form to make sure I don't miss anything. You don't have that advantage but you can closely replicate what we look for. Take a pad and pencil with you and write a few things down as you do your inspection.

The first thing I do is locate the car's vehicle identification number on the dashboard just behind the lower left corner of the windshield and write it down. I will check to make sure it matches the title and registration. All ownership paperwork must match the car I'm looking at.

Because this is your friend's car, you may be aware of its history. Dealerships don't have that luxury so we do as thorough an inspection as possible in the short time we have to decide a value. Naturally, most folks don't tell us anything they believe might decrease their trade's value.

I start a slow walk-around at one of the front corners of the car. By habit I move counter-clockwise. I look for evidence of previously repaired damage. Do all the body parts line up? Does the paint match? Is there any paint overspray or evidence of body filler? If there is, I check farther to determine the extent of the damage and how it may affect the value of the car. We always ask the owner if he or she knows of previous damage or major repairs.

I check the windows for cracks or chips and visually measure the wear on the tires – noting any uneven wear. I also check all the doors and windows to see if they open and close easily and look to see that the original manufacturer placards are attached to the door and/or door frame and the vehicle identification number is the same as I found when I started.

When the driver's door is open, I check and write down the odometer reading so I can ask myself whether or not the wear and tear indicates the mileage is accurate. I also check the interior condition and odor. (If someone has taken good care of the interior of their car, they probably have properly mechanically maintained their car.) Are the seat belts all there? Are the head restraints all there? While I am in the driver's seat, I do several other checks. Do the headlights, taillights, brake lights and turn signal lights all work?

I open the trunk or rear hatch and look for alignment, ease of operation, paint overspray, or evidence of mold or mildew from water leaks. I then check to see if the spare tire is still there or if it has been used or replaced.

When I get back to the front end, I open the hood and check belts, hoses, battery and the general condition of the engine compartment. Are all the parts there or has there been some alteration? The oil shouldn't be dirty. The automatic transmission fluid should be reddish, clear and not smell burned. The coolant level should be within the reservoir markings. And, again, I look for evidence of damage or paint overspray.

Once I've closed the hood, I review my notes and get ready for the test drive. Hang on to this article and next week, I'll walk you through a test drive to finish giving you an idea what an automobile professional looks for when evaluating a pre-owned car or truck.