

Buying Techniques That Work

A flashlight is mandatory. Use it to look for rust repair, panel replacement, and accident damage

How do you keep a seller honest? Every seller has one goal in mind—getting your money—and even the most honest person can “forget” the truth. Over the years, I have developed a buying technique designed to catch Joe Isuzu, who wouldn’t know the truth if it bit him. Herewith are some guidelines:

READ BETWEEN THE LINES

Decipher what the seller’s description really means. People have trouble putting a blatant lie in print for fear of getting caught or having it used against them. So what the description *doesn’t* say is what you should worry about.

For example: “The 1969 Pontiac GTO Judge was equipped with a Ram Air III engine producing 366 hp.” Guess what—I bet this Judge no longer has its original engine.

Previous owner said it ran and drove very well. Call a tow truck if you buy this baby. “Completely original, with freshly done interior, respray, and new drivetrain.” Be afraid, be very afraid.

ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS, TAKE NOTES

Once you have studied the description, make your list. Ask questions that clarify what is written, as well as what is left out. Write down the seller’s answers, especially if dealing face to face. An honest seller won’t mind you taking notes; a dishonest one will squirm.

Research the car you are buying, and know important details, such as casting numbers on key components. Know what equipment was standard and what was optional.

Ask tough questions and keep asking until you are satisfied you get the truth. A “four-owner” car? Get the owners’ names and ask if you may contact them. If the seller doesn’t know the names, how does he know the car only had four owners? Such questions will help you decide if you should proceed.

CRAWL ALL OVER THE CAR

Check the seller’s answers against the car. Have a flashlight and notepad, arm yourself with a book describing where the important numbers are located, and get dirty. Ever see buyers at auction wearing nice clean clothes, who never crack a hood or crawl under a car? They’re asking for it. You’ll see me in a T-shirt and jeans, with a pocket of greasy rags and a flashlight.

If you are not comfortable checking the numbers, get somebody who is—even if just to read them to you. Look for continuity among date codes and general appearance. If a 120,000-mile car has grease on everything except the serial number stamping and date-code casting on the engine block, look for a grinder and Home Depot stamp set under this seller’s workbench.

HOW TO FIND ‘ORIGINAL’ SINS

If the car appears to be real, start checking its condition. Your homework will have told you the trouble areas. For example, on early GTOs, the rear body mounts at the frame are the first place to look; these are the first place GTOs rust. It is also the last place anybody bothers to fix properly, and issues there are easy to spot.

If the car is reported to be unrestored, poke around for proof. Is the carpet original? Seat covers? Body panels? Paint? The desirability of unrestored cars has driven many to doll up tacky old dogs to look “unrestored”.

Spend \$300 and arm yourself with a digital paint-thickness gauge. This device, when held against paint, reports the thickness of the finish. Factory-applied paint is typically 2–5 mils; repaints will result in 8–10 mils or more.



Have I got a deal for you

At a recent auction, I was inspecting a car that proudly proclaimed “100% Original Factory Paint.” Looking at it, I could see imperfections in the underlying prepwork—telling me the car had been repainted. Using my paint gauge, I walked around the car and checked surface thickness at various points.

The seller spotted this and quite defensively came over and barked, “What is that THING you are aiming at my car?” My reply: “It’s a lie detector.” Seller: “What does it tell you?” Me: “You’re guilty.” 10–15 mils everywhere.

A flashlight is mandatory. Use it to look for rust repair, panel replacement, and accident damage. Look in the trunk, under the rear window area, then all the way down the quarter panels forward to the doors. Body filler and paint guns can reach nearly everywhere without much effort, except these areas. Look closely at panel seams and spot welds.

Study original cars and apply this knowledge to restored ones. Be thorough, be educated, and make sure the seller sees you making this kind of inspection. The guilty ones won’t stop talking, and the honest ones will let you look to your heart’s content.

GET ALL CLAIMS IN WRITING

Here’s a tip for auction buyers: If the car passes these tests to your satisfaction, ask the seller to put in writing any claims he has made to you verbally that are not on the printed auction description. If the auction announces a car as “documented with the original build sheet” but it is not on the window card, have the seller and the auction company note on the block ticket that the original build sheet will be delivered with the car.

Take it slow, inspect the car, and verify the seller’s claims. If you are short of knowledge or confidence, the best money you can spend is to hire a specialist.

However, don’t fall prey to one of the “nationwide vehicle inspection services” that have grown up lately. These firms subcontract their orders to local insurance adjusters. I guarantee they will know less than you do about the car in question.

Instead, call restoration shops or clubs in the area and ask for recommendations. Ask the inspector for multiple pictures and to follow a pre-determined checklist. Have these sent to you upon completion. These techniques should help you get the car you thought you were buying into your garage, rather than one that keeps giving you one bad surprise after another. ♦

COLIN COMER is founder and president of Colin’s Classic Automobiles and an avid collector and enthusiast.