

How to Test Drive a Car

By Daniel Jones

By now, you're probably itching to drive the cars you are considering buying. Well, the time has finally arrived. So go ahead and set up test-driving appointments. Here's how to do that.

Arranging Test Drives

Set aside a day to do all your test-driving. Try to minimize your down time. The quicker you can go from car to car, the fresher your impressions will be.

Call the dealerships and set up appointments for test drives. Tell the salesperson you will not be buying the car that day, you only want to see how it drives.

Occasionally, you will find a salesperson that you don't feel comfortable with. If that is the case, call back and ask the sales manager if there is someone else you can deal with. Don't make the mistake of leaving the car you really want on the lot because you are not comfortable with one salesperson. Most dealerships have a large sales staff with a wide variety of personalities. When you get someone you think you will like, make an appointment for a test drive.

During the test drive, customers are tempted to stop shopping and start buying. But remain committed to doing your test drive on one day and your buying on another day. Simply drive the car, take detailed notes on the vehicle, and then take the salesperson's card and leave. It is always best to test drive a few different types of vehicles, and then evaluate the test drive results before making a decision.

Test Driving a Car

The salesperson will guide you along a predetermined route. This is often a 10-minute ride involving a series of right-hand turns that leads back to the dealership. This might be convenient for the dealership, but it's not the best way for you to evaluate the car.

Your test drive should match your driving requirements. If you often drive into the mountains, find a hill and see how the car climbs. If you have a highway commute, see how the car accelerates into traffic and performs in the 60 to 70 mph range. Tell the salesperson what kind of test drive you want, and she/he will accommodate you.

The salesperson will make a photocopy of your license. This is a standard operating procedure that protects dealerships from carjackers. Don't worry, they won't run a credit report with the

information on your license (but you might receive follow-up calls from salespeople). Most salespeople drive the car off the lot and then turn it over to you at some point in the test drive. While they are driving, you can evaluate the car from the passenger's standpoint. Pay attention to the noise and visibility.

What to Look For

Once you get behind the wheel, your first impression will be the way the car feels when you sit in it. Is it a good fit? Are the headroom and legroom sufficient? Are the gauges and controls laid out conveniently?

Before you start driving, adjust the seat, steering wheel, mirrors and seatbelt. Ask yourself if it would be a comfortable car to take on a long trip. Is it going to be easy to park if you do a lot of around town driving?

Turn off the radio before you begin driving. You want to hear the engine and concentrate on the driving experience.

During the test drive look for things you like and dislike about the way the vehicle handles and rides. This is not the time or place to discuss purchasing details with the salesperson. Until you are convinced that the vehicle drives and rides the way you expected, you should hold off on until you are back at the dealership to discuss those details.

When you're back on the car lot, remember to check the trunk space. You will probably be shown the engine, too. Unless you are mechanically inclined, there is not much to look for. You may, however, want to find out how easy it is to find basic maintenance items like the oil dipstick and fluid reservoirs.

If you are interested in buying the car you've driven, you should write down the figures on the sticker. This should include the base price and all the options and their costs. Also, write down the stock number of the car (a number posted in the windshield) so you can locate it again when you return.

Then go on to the next test drive. Who knows? You might like the next car a lot better. And if you like more than one car, you will be in a stronger bargaining position when it comes time to buy.