

# Sell Your Vehicle Safely

Common Sense and Planning Can Keep You Out of Trouble



People avoid selling their own cars because they don't want to deal with strangers. But it can be done safely.

A man who listed his car for sale is killed by a man who wanted to strip the turbocharger and other parts from the vehicle. A New York man lists his BMW online, only to be stabbed and stuffed into the car's trunk by an ex-con who arranged a meeting on the pretext of buying the vehicle.

Although such stories show the potential danger of private-party used-car sales, don't let these extreme cases deter you. You can safely sell your used car — and maximize its value — by taking the right preventive measures.

Any one of several sites that facilitate private-party car sales, means that buyers and sellers complete billions of transactions with an "extremely low" incidence of violent crime. Still, selling your car does put you at risk of fraud, scams, robbery and possible personal attacks.

The safety advice in this article comes from the police and my own personal experience selling more than 50 cars from Edmunds' long-term test fleet. There's also another very knowledgeable but less obvious source of good tips: real-estate agents. They often meet strangers to arrange a sale and sometimes the transactions put them in vulnerable positions. Just like private-party car sellers.

## **The Big 4 Tips for Car-Selling Safety**

1. Vet callers thoroughly. When Steve Goddard, former president of the California Association of Realtors, takes a call from someone he's never met, he makes sure the caller is serious about buying a property and isn't trying to

lure him into a trap to rob him. "I ask them lots of questions about what they are looking for and what their needs are," he says. "The more I engage them in conversation, the more you get a feel for them."

2. Don't go to a meeting alone. It's that simple, says Rico Fernandez, a sergeant with the Long Beach Police Department in California. "Take someone with you. People are less apt to harm you if there is someone else there."

3. Meet in a public place. Goddard says that when he meets someone for the first time, he does so at his office. While you can't do that when you're selling a car, you can arrange to meet would-be buyers in a public place, such as a shopping mall parking lot.

4. Trust your gut. Qualifying callers is a combination of intuition and experience, Goddard says. And if you're not comfortable meeting with strangers under any circumstances, you should turn the sale over to an auto broker or trade in the vehicle. You'll have to accept that you might not get the best deal, but peace of mind is priceless. So is your life.

## **Screening 101**

If you do a good job screening buyers before you meet them face-to-face, selling your car will go much more smoothly. Listing your car will bring e-mails, text messages and calls from interested parties. Use your intuition to spot anything suspicious about these prospective buyers:

- Don't be overly eager for a sale or you might miss a warning sign. If a caller seems suspicious to you, simply hang up.
- Only schedule a test-drive with serious buyers you are able to reach by phone. Invite questions when you talk with them. This prevents you from having to show the car to someone who isn't really interested, or someone you'd rather not deal with. If the caller doesn't seem to know what to ask, volunteer the basics about the car: year, make, model, color, number of doors, number of miles on the car and its key features.
- Beware of professional buyers who just want to "flip" cars, which means reselling them quickly at a profit. Flippers bargain aggressively. You can usually identify these callers because they quickly want to get to your lowest selling price. If you have doubts, ask them if they're buying to resell. While flippers might not pose a hazard to your personal safety, it's better to avoid dealing with them.
- Ask who is coming on the test-drive. Evasive answers might indicate that the caller is setting up a trap.
- Tell the caller you will want to see a driver license before the test-drive. This might discourage anyone with criminal intentions from going any further.

### **On the Test-Drive**

- When you ask to see the buyer's driver license before the test-drive, make a copy of it, if possible, and leave it with a third party.
- Have a friend or family member come along with you. If no one is available, at the very least let someone know where you are going and with whom you're meeting.
- Take your cell phone with you so you can call for help if anything goes wrong. If you are suspicious and don't want the would-be buyer to know that, arrange a code word beforehand with a friend or family member. Using the code word will be your way of telling your friend you need help.
- Meet prospective buyers during the day in a public area such as the parking lot of a mall. Park the car in a high traffic area where people can see you.
- Don't leave any valuables in the car on the test-drive. Don't leave your wallet in the center console.
- Accompany the buyer on the test-drive. This ensures that he can't just drive off with your car, never to be seen again. Furthermore, the buyer may be unfamiliar with the area and will need directions for the test-drive.
- If for some reason you can't ride along, don't give your only car key to the prospective buyer. If the "buyer" decides to take a joy ride and abandons your car, it's easier to retrieve if you have an extra key.
- Keep the test-drive short and go through populated areas. Most buyers don't expect a long test-drive. If your buyer wants more time, let him ask you for it.

## **Negotiation and Sale**

If the person is serious about buying the car, he will want to negotiate the price. Here are a few tips to make sure that transaction goes smoothly:

- Refuse any unusual requests, such as driving the would-be buyer to another location. Often, such a request is framed in terms of getting the money or arranging a loan to finish the sale. Instead, tell the buyer to make his arrangements on his own and call you back when he is ready to conclude the sale.
- If the test-drive begins and ends at your home, don't let the prospective buyer into the house. Conduct the transaction at the curb. Have the paperwork ready beforehand and keep the car's title, often called "pink slip," unsigned and out of sight until you have full payment.
- Once the deal is complete and the car is out of your hands, immediately file a "release of liability" form with the registry of motor vehicles. Then, if it's used in a crime, you won't be held responsible.

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