

# Professional advice for a sound car

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Frank Albo checks out cars the same way he checks out potential girlfriends, or 'chicks,' as he refers to women in general.

He's a little rude and sometimes intrusive, but he knows what he likes. And if he doesn't find what he wants, he moves on.

The 28-year-old mechanic, who owns a small garage and takes it upon himself to help used-car buyers separate the beauties from the beasts, knows what to look for in a previously loved honey. That's because once you scrape away all the cake dressing, you're left with reality, and some pretty hard decisions to make.

The Cat wonders what Albo is really referring to.

"There's lots of ways to make an old car look better," he says. "But if you know what you're looking for... She has to look good, smell good and sound good."

Thanks for clearing that up, Albo.

Of course, our man-of-the-week is talking about his second love - cars, and has offered to share the ins and outs of what he does.

Why? Because there's nothin' worse than thinking you got the deal of the century on a used car, then chalking up much, much, much more money to make roadworthy what has turned out to be a rolling heap.

Put down your daggers fellow females, Albo is here to help.

## LOOKS DO MATTER

Just 'cause she shines, doesn't mean she's a gem. While you're busy drooling over the new paint, Albo has put on his suspicious hat. Something might be hiding beneath. Maybe damage, maybe not. Look closely at the paint - are all panels the same shade? Mismatched panels and inconsistent spacing between them could mean the car has been in a tangle. Suspect the new and shinier panels right away. Whatever you do, ask a lot of questions.

If you open the door and there's excessive wear and tear to the interior, it's a pretty good sign that the previous owners weren't concerned with the overall upkeep that extends beneath the body and under the hood.

"You will know just by looking at the seats if someone took good care of the (whole) car."

Take a gander at the brake pedal to see if it has been worn down to the nub. It's a clear sign the vehicle has been driven - a lot. It helps to know this, because you can't always trust the odometer as a sign of wear and tear. Use and misuse are just as important. Does it really matter that there's only 1,000 kilometres showing... if those 1,000 kilometres were driven under water? You get the point.

## IS SHE BALANCED?

If you squat down and take a look at the car, it should be sitting level. Any difference in the front or back could mean that the springs need replacing. Left-to-right differences in height might even be an indicator of suspension or spring damage... maybe even an accident. Again, ask a lot of questions.

Test the shocks and struts by bouncing the front and back of the car. It shouldn't bounce more than once. If it bobs up and down a few times, the shocks/struts most likely need replacing.

Fluids that appear to be dripping from crucial front-end components lets you know the time for replacement is probably near, you know, since the parts aren't actually designed to leak vital fluids.

Unusual tire wear (such as the inside or outside edges) is a dead giveaway that the car needs, at the very least, an alignment or, in some cases, suspension work.

"These are things you can't hide."

## TAKE HER OUT AND LISTEN TO HER

On the test drive, pay attention to sounds, smells and any strange movements. Trust your gut. Notice if the car 'pulls' to one side or another (a sign that it's out of alignment) or if it vibrates at higher speeds (tires aren't balanced).

Listen for any clunking or humming from the front or rear.

"If she makes some noise back there, it could be that the gears are worn."

If you hear a thud or click while you take a turn, it's a sign that the axles and or the bearings are shot.

The rule of thumb here is simple. If you find yourself asking, "Is it supposed to make that noise?" it's probably time to hand the keys back and say good bye.

## WHAT'S INSIDE - DOES SHE HAVE A GOOD HEART?

Check the transmission. The fluid should be pink or red and it shouldn't smell like burnt plastic. That smell means the transmission has been abused or overheated and might need a very expensive fix (probably right after you buy it). Puddles underneath are also a bad sign.

"You don't want to have to fix the transmission," says Albo. "Sometimes it costs more than the car itself."

Albo must be talking about my car.

If you really want to know if you have a good catch, take a close look at the heart of the car, the engine. Is it clean? (Although it could have been degreased). Is there enough oil and what colour is it before and after the test drive? Does anything look tampered with? Does it make any knocking or ticking noises while it's running? Have

someone follow behind in another car and check for tell-tale exhaust smoke.

"If it does, drop her. It'll cost you!"

Spoken like a true man, Albo.

Black indicates the car is getting too much gas. Blue usually means the engine is worn out (expensive) and white smoke means coolant is getting into the combustion chambers, probably through a blown head gasket or cracked cylinder head (also expensive). So, keep your eyes peeled.

"In the end, you have to do what feels right for you," says Albo. "If you can overlook a few really, really minor flaws because you like the car, so be it. You have to weigh the pluses and minuses. That's your job, not mine."

Lease rates are those offered by MINI Financial Services only on approved credit. MSRP for a 2002 MINI Cooper is \$24,950.00; at a lease rate of 7.75% over 36 months is \$299.00 per month. A down payment of \$3,410.00 is required, as well as, first month's lease payment, security deposit of approximately one month's lease payment, transport and preparation (\$1,295.00), and all taxes upon signing. Options are available at an extra cost, together with tax, license, registration, and insurance. Annual kilometres limited to 20,000; \$0.15 per excess kilometre. Delivery must be taken by September 30, 2002. MINI Cooper above shown with 16" wheels included in the optional Sport Package available for an additional \$30 per month. Please see dealer for complete details. © 2002 MINI Canada, a division of BMW Canada Inc. "MINI" and the MINI logo are trademarks of BMW AG used under licence by BMW Canada Inc.

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