

Ask Auto Andy

Can Classified Ads Be Bad?

(NAPSA)—Dear Auto Andy—

Recently when shopping for a used car, we answered a classified ad for a car that seemed to meet all our criteria. My husband met the seller at a local school parking lot to see the car. He said he was selling it for a friend who got a job in another state. It was a recent model year that looked to be in good condition with low mileage—so we bought it, for \$9,000.

Almost immediately we began having problems with it. We ran a vehicle history report only to learn that the car was previously salvaged. We've tried to call the seller, but his line is "no longer in service," and we have no other way to reach him. We thought we were getting a great deal, but it looks like we got taken instead! Is there anything we can do?

W.S., Seattle, WA

Dear W.S.—

You got scammed! And sadly, without reliable contact information, there's not much you can do. So, to protect yourself next time, read on.

Unfortunately, you were victims of what industry experts say is a growing problem—curbstoning. Law enforcement officials estimate that the majority of cars offered in classified ads or at the curb are sold by scam artists, known as curbstoners. These are unlicensed dealers who pose as private sellers and frequently sell vehicles which reputable dealers won't touch because of hidden problems that affect the vehicle's safety and value.

Here's how it works. Curbstoners comb salvage yards for cars that can be cleaned up to "look good as new." They paint over weld marks, polish chrome and roll back odometers, and—voilà!—like-new cars to sell. Next they advertise in the classifieds or put the cars in a highly trafficked parking lot with "for sale" signs in the windows. When an unsuspecting shopper calls to inquire about the car, the curbstoner says it's been "in his



Don't let yourself be scammed. When a used-car deal seems too good to be true, it probably is.

grandmother's garage" or that he's selling it "for a buddy in the military overseas." There, W.S., is the dirty scam of curbstoning.

You mentioned running a vehicle history report, but after the purchase. The people at Carfax Vehicle History Service have been working to educate and protect consumers from these rip-off artists. I found these tips from Carfax, I think you'll find them useful:

- Look at the seller's license and the car's title. If the names on the two documents don't match, don't buy the car. Selling it for a friend or family member should send up red flags.
- Curbstoners won't meet you at their homes; if you are meeting in a parking lot, be wary.
- Ask for a detailed vehicle history that will reveal hidden problems in a car's past like a salvage history, odometer fraud or flood damage. Or, ask for the VIN and run the history on Carfax.com.
- Take the car to a trusted mechanic for a pre-purchase inspection.
- Check the phone number. If the same phone number appears in multiple ads, the seller is probably curbstoning.

Remember, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is! Walk away—there's always another car and another deal.

—Andy