

Consumer Corner

Don't Let A Curbstoner Take You For A Ride

(NAPSA)—Used-car bargain hunters beware: The latest trend in consumer rip-offs is hitting the streets—it's called curbstoning.

What is curbstoning? Most states limit the number of cars that a person can sell without a dealer's license or only allow the selling of one's personal car.

Curbstoners ignore these laws and sell multiple cars that frequently have hidden problems in their past—problems that can affect both the safety and the value of these vehicles.

Experts say this practice is reaching epidemic proportions, with police officials estimating that nearly 80 percent of the cars advertised in classified ads may be listed by illegal sellers.

Before buying any used car, consumers should make sure that they have done their research on both the vehicle and the seller. Used car buyers should be wary of sales conducted from the side of the curb or a vacant lot. Often, these vehicles are sold by con men posing as private individual sellers.

Fortunately, there are ways to guard against curbstoners:

- Don't be shy; ask for the seller's driver's license. Ask to see any service records and get a history of the vehicle. For example, reports produced by a service called Carfax can reveal hidden problems in a car's past, such as salvage history, odometer fraud or flood damage.

- Take the car to a trusted mechanic. A physical inspection can uncover problems such as weld marks, water spots and uneven tire treads. These problems can indi-



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cate a potentially unsafe vehicle.

- Be leery of a price that seems too good to be true. Curbstoners try to make fast money and disappear, so get the facts and protect yourself.

- Visit reputable used-car dealers. They'll be happy to help you find the perfect car.

- Check for indications of odometer tampering. Is the physical condition of the vehicle consistent with the mileage indicated on the odometer? For example, a car with worn tires, rust and worn seats and floor mats probably has more than 20,000 miles on it. Use your best judgment.

- Finally, make sure that you have a way to get back in touch with the car seller. If there is a problem, you'll have some way of reaching him or her for repairs or returns. Beware of sellers who only give out a cell phone or pager number. Curbstoners often change their locations to avoid being caught.

Ask your dealer or log on to www.carfax.com to learn more.