

Thumping Or Soothing: An Upgraded Sound System Improves The Drive

(NAPSA)—While music may or may not soothe the savage beast, it can often calm a frazzled commuter. “However, to really enjoy your music on the road, you may need to make a few upgrades to your vehicle’s sound system. Perhaps your stereo doesn’t have enough volume or sounds muddy. Or maybe it doesn’t play CDs or MP3s,” says Sue Elliott-Sink, director of content for *enjoythedrive.com*, the consumer Web site from SEMA, the Specialty Equipment Market Association.

If your current vehicle is lacking, these tips may help bring music to your ears:

1. What do you want to play? The part of the stereo that goes in the dash is known as the head unit or receiver. Some can play CDs, video CDs, DVDs, MP3-formatted music, satellite radio and AM/FM radio. If your head unit doesn’t play all the media you want, you can upgrade to a new unit—or add capabilities to your existing one. For instance, some factory head units can control a CD changer. If yours can’t, you can add an “RF” CD changer that sends the music to your head unit via a specific radio frequency. Another option is using a patch cable to connect a CD player or MP3 player. Plus, you can add a satellite radio receiver to virtually any factory sound system.

2. Do you burn your own CDs? If you do, be aware that not all CD players can play CD-Rs or CD-RWs, so you’ll want to choose a head unit or CD changer that can handle your “homemade” music.

3. Do you hate changing tapes or CDs? Searching for a CD, opening the case and removing the disc that’s playing is distracting. Installing a CD changer (either in-dash or remote mounted) or an MP3 player allows you to play hours of tunes without having to juggle CD or tape cases on the road.

4. Is the sound quality lacking? If your system doesn’t produce clean, clear sound, you need



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new speakers. For the ultimate in sound quality and volume, you’ll want tweeters for high-end frequencies, mid-ranges for middle frequencies, woofers for low frequencies and subwoofers for ultra-low frequencies.

These individual components also may require separate amplifiers to boost the signal and send the right sounds to the right speakers. For a less complicated installation, many speakers feature multiple “drivers” built in. A coaxial speaker will have two drivers: a tweeter and either a mid-range or a bass. A triaxial speaker will have a tweeter, mid-range and bass, all in one unit.

5. How much power do you need? If your head unit doesn’t produce enough power, you can add an amplifier to increase power output to the speakers. However, don’t just shop for power—look for components that work well together. For instance, if you choose speakers that can barely handle the power your system puts out, you may damage the speakers. Another major cause of speaker damage: using a low-power head unit with high-end speakers. The key is to match the power output and power requirements of the various components.

6. Are you worried about security? Many head units feature removable face plates or programmable security codes (similar to your ATM PIN). Others have a face that rotates when not in use, effectively turning its back on thieves. These features may

not make a unit theft-proof, but if it is stolen, at least the thief can’t use it.

7. Is your dash opening a strange shape? A variety of adapters make it easier to remove an oddly shaped factory head unit and replace it with a standard-sized model.

8. Is noise or bouncing a problem? Road and wind noise can diminish the sound quality of any system. Adding sound-deadening materials under the carpet, above the headliner and in door panels can improve your audio experience. Also, if you drive a 4x4 or a sports car with a stiff suspension, you’ll want a CD player with shock protection to keep it from skipping. Look for a memory buffer or an internal suspension system that absorbs vibration and shock.

For more information on sound systems, go to the SEMA Web site www.enjoythedrive.com. It includes information on hundreds of the latest custom-auto accessories, as well as links to product manufacturers’ and retailers’ Web sites. Or, write to SEMA, Sound Systems, 1575 S. Valley Vista Dr., Diamond Bar, CA 91765-3914.

THD? SN? Hz? Foreign to you?

If you don’t know what some of the numbers mean, it can be hard to compare components. To help keep things simple, here’s what to look for:

- **Total harmonic distortion (THD).** The lower this number, the cleaner the sound. Some high-end head units have a THD of 0.05 percent or less.
- **Signal-to-noise (SN) ratio.** A higher number is better. For example, a cassette player with an SN ratio of 68 dB will sound better than one with a ratio of 55 dB. Better CD players have SN ratios of 90 dB or higher.
- **Frequency response.** A wider range is better. For example, typical CD players can reproduce frequencies from 10 Hz to 20,000 Hz.