

cyber cars

GOING CAR SHOPPING?
JUST REMEMBER YOU CAN'T
KICK THE TIRES ONLINE.

BY MARK LUCE

So you're watching late-night TV, and you keep seeing these whiz-bang ads about how easy it is to buy a car online. Think again, cowboy.

Trying to buy a car online is more hassle than it's worth. It's not like purchasing a book, clothes or even furniture. It takes too long and is extremely frustrating. Also, it's really tough to kick the tires over the phone lines.

If you dig deeply into some of the more well-known auto sites — *autobytel.com*, *giggo.com*, *imotors.com*, *autoweb.com*, *vehix.com*, *carpoint.com* and *autodealer.com* — the first thing you'll discover is that nearly every car is somehow tied to dealers. The other thing you notice is how all the sites have connections with finance and insurance companies so that, in theory, you can make a total car purchase in no time.

But that's all in theory. Even getting a quick quote on a new car is a hassle. I was looking (out of my range) at a new 2000 Jaguar XJ8 on *vehix.com*. After filling out my name and address, scads of contact information and e-mail, I was

unceremoniously told that a dealer would contact me in a few days. So I called a local Jaguar dealer, and in about 30 seconds the sales manager told me it would be about \$59,000 for a 2000 XJ8 with heated seats and a killer sound system.

Used cars can be even more of a hassle. The way most of the sites are designed, you search for cars by your zip code. If you live in Montana, good luck finding anything. Even being 30 miles from Kansas City, Mo., brought a whole lot of nothing.

There is a practical side to all of this. Most sane people I know won't buy a car sight unseen. Even though some of the sites, such as *autoweb.com*, offer "360-degree interior views," seeing a grainy photo on the Web isn't the same as smelling the inside, seeing the dings and getting an overall feel for the car — not to mention taking a test drive.

Normally I would never encourage anyone to deal with the bad neckties and slick ways of a used-car dealer, but I will now. In fact, after wading in the morass of online auto buying for several days, I'm amazed at the total lack of ease of nearly all the online car sites. You're better off with a pen and the classifieds or just driving from lot to lot.

That's not to say there isn't good information about cars on the Web. But as all good consumers know, it's buyer beware and do your homework. Your best bet is to use the Web for research.



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With that in mind, one of the best sites is *www.kbb.com*, home of the ubiquitous Kelley Blue Book. Not only will it tell you if you're getting rooked on a car price, but it also features a check for lemons, a list of local dealers, online quotes and a payment calculator.

Another site that is simple to use — and not as geographically constricting — is *www.autotrader.com*, which combines private sellers and dealers with easy-to-navigate links. If you're looking to buy new, the Saturn site, *www.saturn.com*, is the easiest of all. I picked a L-Series model and was looking at a reasonable no-haggle price in minutes.

I did do some dream scouting and found a 1999 Lamborghini Diablo through *autotrader.com*. It was a steal at \$299,500. A trip to the Kelley Blue Book finance calculator told me I could have the car with no money down on a 60-month loan at 8 percent for the bargain price of \$6,082.90 a month.

Mark Luce, a free-lance writer based in Lawrence, Kan., has spent a total of \$701 on his last three vehicles, which have lasted him nearly seven years.

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