

Non-existent traps of buying a new car

This is a non-beginners' guide to buying a car. The “non” refers to the fact that apart from people under 15 there is no such thing as a beginner car buyer in New Zealand.

In fact, my grandson got onto his parents' iPad not long ago and bought his first car on Trade Me - but couldn't take delivery, because he's only seven (a lot of emails had to be exchanged). The point is, we almost all of us know how to buy cars. We ought to, because we spend a lifetime doing it (Dad reckoned he owned nearly 60 vehicles over his 84 years).

Yet with all that experience, I've a suspicion many of us, certainly me included, view car buying with trepidation. It usually involves a lot of money, and despite all the guarantees and warranties and other protections I don't begin to understand, there is always the feeling something could go wrong. And the bloody things wear out. Or go out of fashion. Or suddenly no longer suit our circumstances.

We're stuck with car-buying whether we like it or not, and it seems like a useful idea to tell you what's just happened to us, on the pretext we might all learn something. Or not.

As I write this, the car sitting in our carport is the zippy little sports version of a popular small car. But it will be gone by the time you're reading these words, replaced by a more sensible, standard, new iteration of the same brand. Which is something of a small miracle, given that a week ago the idea of buying a new car never entered our heads.

It all began innocently enough, after I started the engine and the radio kicked into life, as usual. But then it went silent, and then not, and then silent, and then not. No amount of fiddling with controls prevented an endless cycle of seven seconds sound, seven seconds silence, same volume, same station.

After a short time, this became intensely irritating, except I found you can get the gist of a RadioNZ interview even when you hear only half of it (too much talk there, guys). And when they're broadcasting someone telling a story, it can be fun to divert thoughts of putting an axe through the misperforming appliance by filling in the seven-second gaps with your own words.

The car was due its annual service, anyway, and the warrant was nearly cut, so the crook radio merely hastened a visit to the car company. While checking it in, I couldn't help noticing the showroom next door, which sparked a reminder our vehicle would be coming out of its three-year warranty in January.

When it turned out the radio needed replacing, but a new one would cost us nothing because of that warranty, the dilemma grew more pronounced. As did the conclusion that after a long and expensive house renovation, our reserves have yet to rebuild to the level required for throwing around big money on new cars.

But there'd be no harm in asking, surely? Just poke your head into the new car showroom for a mini-second, have a quick look at the most basic model of the same popular brand, and ask a simple “what would it cost us to trade...just give us the bottom line”. No harm at all.

The salesman looked up and smiled. “I'd have to get our finance people to check that out,” he said. “Don't worry,” I said, and escaped. Briefly. He followed, re-introducing himself as the man who sold us the present car. Handshakes. Renewal of conversation. Back to the showroom to look at the basic model.

“How are you getting home?” he asked. “Walking. Do me good.” “Take my car – it's identical to the one you've been looking at.” Ogling, more like. A test run, then. It has a backing camera - a major advance given our tight driveway and the propensity for concrete fence posts to jump out and scratch. As a result, there's a grand's worth of blemishes on the “old” car.

Long story short, offers flowed back and forth for several days, Trade Me prices were studied, calculations made, and conclusions reached that we couldn't afford it. But then, pencils were

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progressively sharpened, higher up people consulted, an endpoint reached. The deal is done. Of course, this will be our last new car, to see us through to a place where there are none. Of course.