

When test-driving a new car, take the technology for a spin

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In this May 26, 2015 file photo, an iPhone is connected to a 2016 Chevrolet Malibu equipped with Apple CarPlay apps, displayed on the car's MyLink screen, top, during a demonstration in Detroit. The rapidly evolving in-car infotainment and navigation systems can be bewildering for all but the most tech-savvy car buyers. The average vehicle on U.S. roads is 11 years old; that means many people last went car shopping before iPhones were invented. (AP Photo/Paul Sancya)

Car shopping isn't just about kicking the tires anymore. It's also about

testing the technology.

The rapidly evolving in-car infotainment and navigation systems can be bewildering for all but the most tech-savvy car buyers. The average vehicle on U.S. roads is 11 years old; that means many people last went car shopping before iPhones were invented.

Car buyers should make sure they can pair their phone with a car, play music from their phone, make a hands-free call and use the navigation system before they leave the dealer lot, experts say. They should make sure volume knobs, climate controls and other technology is intuitive and displayed the way they like. Some drivers want volume controls on the [steering wheel](#), for example, while others prefer a knob on the dashboard.

Safety technology is also changing rapidly, and buyers should familiarize themselves with what the car can and can't do. Some vehicles will brake automatically to avoid a collision, while others flash a warning and help the driver pump the brakes but won't bring the car to a full stop.

"Spend some time in the parking lot sitting in the car and just messing with it," says Ron Montoya, senior consumer advice editor for the car shopping site Edmunds.com.

The issue is a serious one for the auto industry. Consumers' complaints about phone connectivity, navigation and infotainment systems have lowered vehicle dependability scores in annual rankings from J.D. Power and Consumer Reports. Poor showings in such rankings can put a dent in sales. Car shopping site Autotrader.com has found that as many as one-third of buyers will choose a different brand if they think a vehicle's tech features are too hard to use.

To combat that, some brands are setting up technology help desks at

dealerships and boosting employee training. In 2013, General Motors Co. formed a staff of 50 tech specialists to help deal with an increase in questions from customers about new technology. Those specialists train U.S. dealers to pair customers' phones, set up in-car Wi-Fi and set preferences like radio stations.

When he takes customers for test drives, Paul Makowski pairs his own phone with the car and has customers make a call, stream music and do other tasks. He uses his own phone so customers don't worry that their data will be shared with the dealership.

"Some people fear the technology and decline it all, but we still go over it. They don't leave here not knowing what their car has to offer," says Makowski, the sales manager for Ed Rinke Chevrolet Buick GMC in Center Line, Michigan.

Here are some tips for taking a tech test drive:

— **TAKE YOUR TIME:** Test driving the technology should take at least 45 minutes, says Brian Moody, the executive editor at AutoTrader.com. Find out whether your phone is compatible with the car and learn how to pair it. Call a friend and ask if the sound is clear. Make sure the car understands your voice commands. Enter an address into the navigation system or, if the car has the capability, download an address to the car from your phone. Moody says it's better to learn all these tasks at the dealership than on the road.

— **UPDATE YOUR PHONE:** Make sure your phone has the latest operating system when you go shopping. New cars will be most compatible with updated phones.

— **DECIDE WHAT YOU LIKE:** Six percent of new cars sold last year had Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, which display many of your

[phone](#)'s apps on the touchscreen. That's expected to rise to 50 percent by 2020, according to IHS Markit. The familiar interface of those systems can make it easier to transition to in-car technology. But Montoya says there are some shortcomings. Apple CarPlay doesn't support the Waze traffic app or Google maps, for example, and if you want to change a radio station, you have to scroll out of Apple CarPlay and back to your car's radio. You should decide what system is best for you.

— **SHOP AROUND:** Even if you've settled on a vehicle, it never hurts to test drive something else. You may find, for example, that you prefer climate controls on a touchscreen instead of on dashboard knobs, or that one vehicle has easier-to-use buttons on the steering wheel for making calls or adjusting volume. "It might expose you to something better," Montoya says.

— **DON'T FORGET SAFETY:** Lane departure warning systems, backup cameras and blind-spot detection systems work differently depending on the car. Some lane departure systems buzz the seat if you drift out of your lane, for example, while others beep loudly. That's something you might hear or feel a lot, so choose the technology you prefer.

— **BUY WHAT YOU NEED:** Not everyone wants to stream Spotify and chat with Siri while they're driving. If you're in that category, choose a stripped-down model so you're not paying for features you don't need, Montoya says. For example, a Toyota Camry starts at \$23,050, but the EnTune infotainment package, which includes hands-free calling and other features, costs \$775 extra.

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