

Drive Buys

RUB-AND-SNIFF NEW CAR SMELLI!



Rub gently to release the scent of a brand-new car like this Pontiac Solstice!



One of the many great things about driving this Convertible **Pontiac Solstice** is that everyone can see what you're wearing. **Emporio Armani Sterling Silver Watch**, \$245; select Emporio Armani, emporioarmani.com for stores. **Sharon for LaCrasia Leather Driving Gloves**, \$75; LaCrasia Gloves, NY, 212-803-1600, or wegloveyou.com. **Ralph by Ralph Lauren RA7539s Sunglasses**, \$78; select Solstice, 866-246-9043 for stores.



Drivers perform better and are less aggressive when exposed to notes of strawberry and pine.*

The 9 things you absolutely MUST know before you buy your next new car.

1 Shopper, know thyself The secret to stress-free car buying is knowing what you need and want *before* you saunter into the showroom. This allows you to speak confidently to dealers and avoid being taken for a ride. Literally.

Start by prioritizing your needs based on your driving style and your lifestyle. How many people are typically in the car with you? Do you live in a place where it snows (hello 4WD, good-bye convertible)? Are you a skilled or skittish parker? Is your daily commute so long that top fuel economy is a must?

2 Do your homework There are a surprising number of web sites out there filled with up-to-the-minute automotive research. We particularly like edmunds.com, which allows you to search by a specific make and model or by general car category (SUV or sedan, for example) and see all the cars in that class. Price, options and test-drive ratings are included for each and every car, but perhaps the most useful feature is the consumer ratings, where actual owners tell you what they like (and what they *don't* like—the “suggested improvements” section of the reviews is very enlightening) about their new cars.

Don't want to spend time on the Internet? The site will compile all the information about your selected car(s) into a Vehicle InfoPak (\$9.95 each or \$27.95 for 30 days of unlimited access), which you can print out, study and take to the dealership with you.

In addition, all major car manufacturers have their own web sites that provide detailed, but not necessarily unbiased, information about their own models. It's worth logging on to these sites if only to stay up on special manufacturer sales, incentives and rebates in your area—buyatoyota.com is particularly easy to use for this type of information.

3 Safety first For good reason, safety is often number one among women's concerns when buying a car (get government safety ratings for many current models at safecar.gov). These days, available safety features go way beyond airbags to include anti-lock braking systems (ABS), passenger and side curtain airbags and tires that reinflate themselves when punctured long enough for you to drive to a service station.

The new buzz is over electronic stability control (ESC), which steadies the car by automatically applying brake pressure in dangerous situations. Unfortunately, it's called something different by almost every manufacturer: General Motors calls it Stabilitrac, while Ford refers to the same technology as Advance Trac.

Built-in two-way communication systems like OnStar, which uses a Global >

Dream Cars We Love!



For the Sportster on a Budget

2006 Pontiac Solstice, \$19,995 A peppy roadster at a brilliant price. Love how the sloping headlights wink at you over the checkerboard grille.



For the Ultimate Mom

2005 Infiniti FX45, \$45,600 Comes with the new Lane Departure Warning system that makes passing safer, a DVD player to keep the kids happy, and the Intelligent Key system for keyless entry.



For the Eco-Driver

2006 Mercury Mariner Hybrid, under \$30,000 This hot hybrid uses a traditional gas engine at higher speeds and a self-charging electric battery at lower speeds to increase fuel efficiency to an enticing 33 mpg in the city.



For the Single Girl

2005 Chevrolet Corvette, \$43,710 Just missed the kbb.com value retention top 10 list, but the envious stares (and whopping 400-horsepower engine) you'll get will make up for it, we promise.



For the Adventure Seeker

2007 Toyota FJ Cruiser, under \$25,000

When we saw this Land Cruiser makeover, it was love at first sight.



For the Luxury Lady

2006 Bentley Continental GT, \$164,990

Car couture with a luxe interior (note the hand-stitched leather steering wheel cover). The 12-cylinder engine is powerful, but practically silent.



For the City Slicker

2005 Mini Cooper, \$16,950 Easy to park, totally adorable and it's on the kbb.com top 10 list of cars likely to hold their value for the next five years.



For the Country Girl

2005 Toyota Tacoma, \$14,285 Handles with ease and has terrific resale value. Two- and four-wheel-drive versions available.



For the No-Nonsense Type

2006 Mazda 5, \$17,435 The center row of seats slides away to reveal the genius Karakuri storage box. It's a minivan without the stodgy stigma.

All car prices given are for each model's list base price.

Women purchase more than 65% of all new vehicles, 53% of all used vehicles and influence 85% of all sales.

Positioning System (GPS) to track your car's exact location to speed the arrival of roadside assistance, are another real safety advancement. OnStar will be standard on all General Motors, Hummer and Saab vehicles by the end of 2007.

Since one out of every twelve sexual assaults occurs in parking garages, according to the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, it's important for women to consider a few additional safety features as well, like adequate interior lighting, a keyless entry system and lights *under* the car to ensure no one is lurking there.

4 Avoid sticker shock

These days you can get a new car for under \$15,000 or over \$300,000. Which price is right for you? According to edmunds.com (and common sense), your monthly car payments should not exceed 20% of your take-home pay, whether you're leasing or buying.

But getting a good car deal goes beyond staying within your budget. One important factor is what industry types call the cost of ownership. These are normal operating expenses, including insurance, fuel, maintenance, depreciation, etc., which, depending on the total, can make a car more or less of a bargain over the long haul. Before you buy, log on to intellichoice.com, enter the make and model you're interested in and get a tally of its average operating costs over five years of ownership, along with a handy Intelli-choice Value Rating for that car.

To boost your bargaining power once you've narrowed your search down to a particular make and model, call the *Consumer Reports* New Car Price Service (800-509-9376). For \$12 they'll tell you what the dealer paid for the car you're looking at, give you the wholesale price (including any current rebates or incentives), plus the official sticker price. *Consumer Reports* estimates that shoppers can save up to \$2,200 if they're armed with these numbers before they start haggling.

5 Find a fair dealer Warning: Car salesmen have a shady rep for a reason and, as a woman, you're a chief target for an unscrupulous pitch. Top tactics? In addition to padding the sticker price, *Consumer Reports* warns that dealers often try to upsell you on expensive add-ons like undercoating, rust-proofing, fabric protection, extended warranties and windshield etching that not every driver needs. But there are good dealers out there.

Dealerships are regularly rated based on customer surveys conducted by marketing research groups like J.D. Power and Associates. (A useful online resource for comparing dealer ratings can be found at <http://search.bbb.org/dealersearch.html>.) Talk to friends about their dealer experiences and always get price quotes from at least two different dealers. Bring those quotes in writing with you when you're shopping. If you can prove that the same car is available for less on another lot, you may be able to get your dealer to match the price or even better it.

Will you get a better deal if you shop at a suburban dealership vs. one in the big, bad city? It depends. Metro dealers move more cars, which means they can accept a lower markup per unit sold and potentially give you a lower price. On the other hand, a rural community dealer may be more sensitive to his or her local reputation and therefore more focused on customer service and satisfaction.

6 Make the most of your test-drive

Before you even start the car, try it on for size. Check for comfortable seats and head rests, a place to put your handbag, and rear and side visibility. Are the dash gauges easy to read? Are the cup holders where you want them? Do your hands rest comfortably on the steering wheel?

Once you pull out, take the time to get acquainted with the car. Drive everywhere you might normally go—down bumpy roads, in and out of the grocery store parking lot (be sure to parallel park), etc. Some dealers now offer extended test-

drives and let you keep the car overnight, which is an even better way to see if it fits.

7 Get the service you deserve Remember that your relationship with the dealer doesn't end after you purchase the car. Because most new cars now come with complicated computer systems that are often only repairable by dealer mechanics, you will probably need to take your car back to the dealership for routine and emergency maintenance.

Pinpoint dealerships that have received high customer service ratings. Jaguar, Lexus, Cadillac, Mercury and Mercedes-Benz top J.D. Power and Associates' 2004 Sales Satisfaction Index (jdpower.com). And before you buy, speak to the dealership's service advisor to make sure you're treated courteously.

8 Hit sale season The majority of new models arrive in showrooms in the fall and most cars are sold between April and June, says Tom Libby, senior director of industry analysis for J.D. Power and Associates. Sales are lowest in January and November, so these are great months to go looking for bargains as dealers, anxious to make room for new models, offer extra incentives to buy.

9 Look to the future It's hard to imagine right now, in the first flush of your new car ownership, but you will probably sell your car someday—J.D. Power and Associates reports that the average length of new car ownership is 5.2 years. And you'll *certainly* want to get good money for it when you do. So considering a car's resale value is crucial if you want to make a smart investment.

For 79 years the Kelley Blue Book has been the bible of automotive resale values. You can still get the old-fashioned book, but kbb.com offers the same depreciation and resale value information at your fingertips online. —TAMARA WARREN

Cars need accessories, too! 5 great add-ons that are worth the splurge.

1. GG Bailey Saratoga Car Mats, \$90 and up

Express your personal style with these custom-made mats available in 30 colors and a multitude of personality-packed patterns; ggbailey.com. **2. Tod's Classic Driving Loafers, \$295** (sizes 5–11) A classic with the requisite nubs on the back heel to keep the leather from getting scuffed as you zoom, zoom, zoom; Tod's, 800-457-8637.

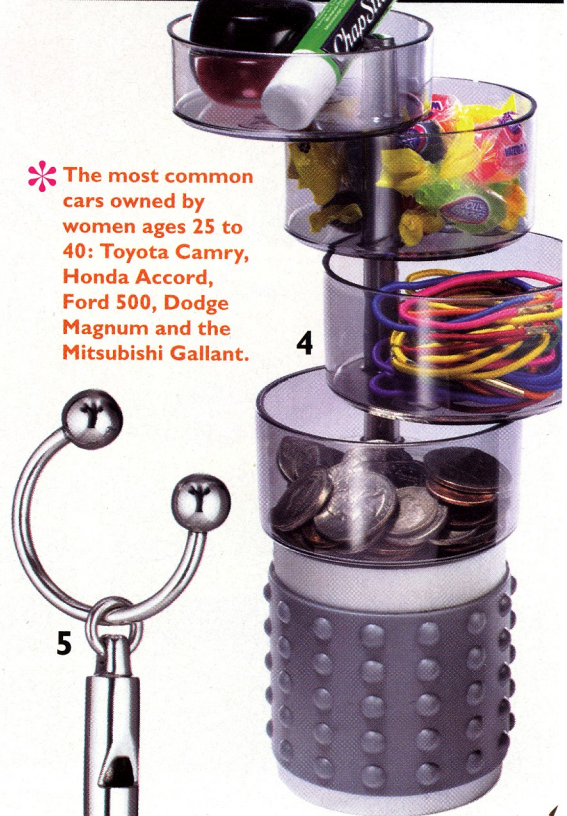
3. Kenwood KDC-X589, \$250 Exclusive "AC Drive" technology is like an iPod for your car. Just burn all your favorite music onto a data CD, and it organizes playlists by category, mood or artist. Comes with a remote control for backseat DJs; kenwoodusa.com for stores.

4. Copco Swivel Container, \$5.99 How many times have you frantically groped for toll money or lip gloss that's disappeared between the seats? No more. This genius device fits into any standard cup holder and keeps everything within reach; Target. **5. Lunt Keychain, \$100** This keychain is both adorable and functional (the attached whistle is a safety alarm); luntsilver.com for stores.

STYLE MATTERS

"Women know what is hip and we'll see it when a man might not," says Anne Asensio, executive director of advanced design at General Motors. Right now, what's hip is color. According to Christopher Webb, color trend manager for GM, black, white, silver and beige still account for half of all US car sales. But, he adds, sunset orange, victory red and amethyst are at the top of the hot new color list, and he also notes that 20% of shoppers will choose another model if they don't see the one they're looking for in the color they want. "During conservative economic climates, neutral colors dominate," Webb explains "Now, in a period of more optimism, color is gradually coming back." But don't go too nuts. According to the Kelley Blue Book, neutrals depreciate slower, while vibrant colors may reduce resale value.

Say what? Log on to shopetc.com for a complete glossary of car lingo.



*** The most common cars owned by women ages 25 to 40: Toyota Camry, Honda Accord, Ford 500, Dodge Magnum and the Mitsubishi Gallant.**