

# **Unlicensed Dealers** commonly known as “Curbstoners”

And What You Should Know  
About Buying a Used Vehicle



## **What Is Curbstoning?**

Curbstoning is an unlicensed vehicle deal. A person who sells vehicles on the street or “at the curb” instead of at a dealership location could be “curbstoning.” Curbstoners may also advertise vehicles in the newspaper classified section.

## **What Are The Risks?**

Buying from a curbstoner increases your risk of being unable to transfer a title. A curbstoned sale may masquerade as a “steal” but could actually be a previously wrecked vehicle, one with a “rolled back” odometer, or even a stolen vehicle.

Curbstoners do not comply with state or federal laws and any dealings with them are not protected.

## **How To Spot A Possible Curbstoner**

Not everyone is out to break the law, but if your “great deal” is made with a vast majority of these conditions, look out! There are several “clues” you can look for:

- The license plates are out-of-state, issued temporarily, are dealer tags, or missing altogether.
- The seller admits he/she is a dealer but says it’s a personal vehicle.
- The seller insists on a cash payment.
- The vehicle’s title is not in the seller’s name.
- The seller offers to do the tag and title paperwork.
- The title is recently issued, or the seller refuses to show you the title.
- The seller gives only a pager or cell phone number.
- The same phone number is listed for multiple vehicles in the newspaper or outdoor location.
- The vehicles are for sale by the roadside, in vacant lots, at shopping centers, or in driveways.
- The seller wants to meet at a different location other than his or her residence.

## What To Ask?

When you take a look at the vehicle, consider asking these questions of the seller:

- Are you a vehicle dealer? Why are you selling the car?

Remember, with the exception of private sales, anyone in the business of selling or buying vehicles in the State of Maryland must be licensed. Ask to see the dealer's license.

- Are you the owner of the vehicle? Is the vehicle titled in your name?

The seller of the vehicle must be the owner or co-owner (with the other owner's permission) as well. Check to see if the names on the title and seller's driver's license match. Does the vehicle's identification number, make, model and year match what is listed on the title?

- How long have you owned the vehicle? Did you buy it new?

These questions are important for you to determine if the vehicle has been well taken care of, or if you are looking at a vehicle with a "shady past!" You can check into the history of the vehicle by researching the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) on-line under "vehicle history." A history of auto auctions and/or sales across multiple states may indicate problems.

**Please note:** A fee is charged for each vehicle history report.

- What is the mileage now, and what was it when you bought the vehicle?

Check the mileage indicated on the title against the odometer. It's important to note that vehicles normally average an accumulation of between 12 and 15 thousand miles each year.

You might also want to check the odometer against the mileage on an oil-change or other maintenance stickers that can be found on the door frame, in the glove box, or under the hood. An odometer with numbers that are misaligned could indicate a possible "roll back." If the odometer numbers "jiggle" when you strike the dashboard, that is another indication that someone may have tampered with them.

- Has there been any major work performed on the vehicle? Has the car had body repairs? Has the vehicle ever had a rust problem or been repainted? If the seller answers yes to any of these questions, ask for any receipts for the work performed on the vehicle.

If possible, have a qualified mechanic thoroughly check the vehicle. Look for paint color that is not evenly spread on the vehicle, check its texture, and whether or not there are any misaligned parts on the body of the vehicle. Check to see if the doors, hood, and trunk open and shut easily. You will want to check the way the tires are worn. If the tires show they have uneven wear and tear on them, this may indicate abuse, poor wheel alignment, or damaged front-end components. You should also check the horn, the radio, the heater, the wipers, and the defoggers. Try the windows and seatbelts. Test the headlights, the taillights, the flashers, the back-up lights, the brake lights, the turn signals, and the parking lights. Check under the hood, and examine for worn hoses, battery leaks, dirty dipstick oil, or dark or burnt smelling transmission fluid.

- How has the car been driven? For example, did the seller take the car around town or was it taken on a majority of long trips?

Ask for service and warranty records. You will want to check for excessive brake pedal wear, which would be consistent with high mileage. To check the brakes, ask if you can test drive the vehicle. While you are driving 30 to 40 mph with no one behind you, apply the brakes 3 or 4 times. A consistent pull to the left or the right will indicate a problem.

- What are the vehicle's best features? What would I need to do to put the vehicle in top shape?

A seller who really has owned the vehicle will be able to answer these questions easily.

- Have you had the vehicle inspected?

Maryland law requires the seller to present the buyer with a Maryland Safety Inspection Certificate.

## **Know The Law**

Anyone in the business of buying or selling vehicles in Maryland must be licensed. Unlicensed dealers may face up to a \$1000 fine or up to 6 months in jail, or both, for a first offense. Subsequent offenses may bring stiffer penalties.

Dealers who advertise in the newspaper must disclose that they are dealers.

All licensed dealers must:

- maintain a physical place of business and do business only at that location.
- present the buyer with a Maryland Safety Inspection Certificate.
- guarantee that the sales staff is licensed.
- make every reasonable effort to guarantee that the vehicles have clear titles (which would indicate the vehicle is not stolen or one with odometer fraud).

Dealers not licensed in Maryland may not sell vehicles in Maryland. Therefore, you need to be wary of any “bill of sale” or paperwork that indicates any out-of-state information.

Please report any unlicensed dealers to the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration at 1-800-950-1MVA.

Hopefully, your vehicle sale will be a safe, legal and enjoyable experience. If you have any questions or concerns, The Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration would be glad to help.