Buying a used car – A few words of advice

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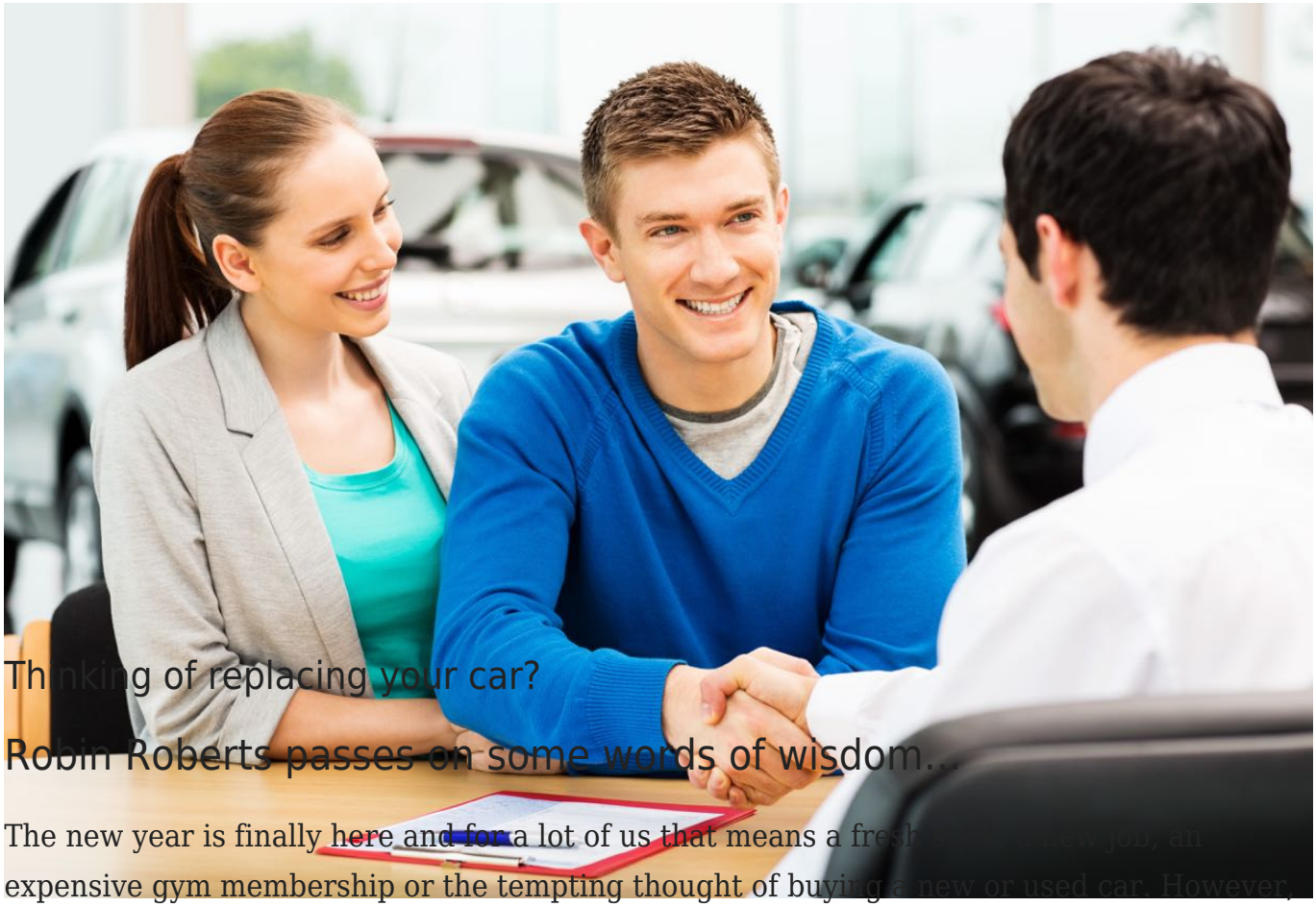


Thinking of replacing your car?

Robin Roberts passes on some words of wisdom...

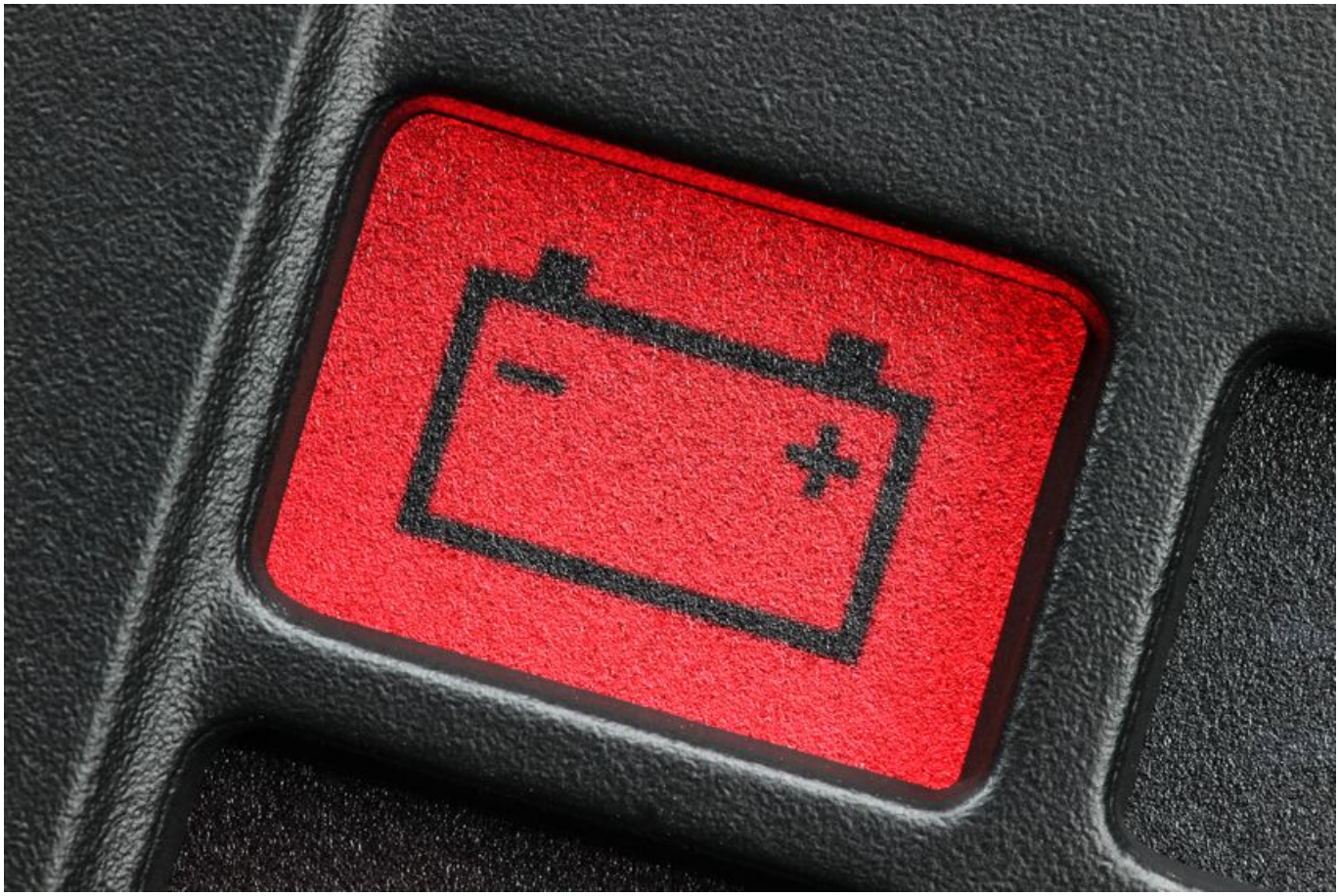
The new year is finally here and for a lot of us that means a fresh start, be it a new job, an expensive gym membership or the tempting thought of buying a new or used car. However, today's high-tech cars can be concealing unknown wallet-crunching problems. Fortunately, you don't need a degree in electronics or a mobile diagnostic machine. Just follow the advice of Tim Shallcross, IAM RoadSmart's head of technical policy, and you'll soon tell a trustworthy bargain from a troublesome money pit.

Service history

Modern engines are staggeringly efficient compared with their predecessors, but proper maintenance is essential to keep them that way. Oil, brake fluid, filters and coolant must all be changed when the manufacturer specifies (and ideally more frequently than that, adds Kim), otherwise expensive problems are being stored up for the future. Ask for the service history and take time to look through it carefully. If the service record is seriously incomplete or missing – walk away, otherwise you could be footing the bill for someone else's neglect.

Dashboard lights

ABS, SRS, ESC, engine management – every electronic system has a warning light. Make sure they all light up when you turn on the ignition – unscrupulous sellers have been known to remove a bulb to disguise a faulty system. You may need to turn the ignition on and off a few times before you spot them all. Most should go out within a few seconds, the rest of them when you start the engine and release the parking brake (handbrake). After that, a light means a problem. Don't be fobbed off with "they all do that" or "that's normal." The car has a fault, so walk away.



Engine

Listen carefully for the first few seconds – knocks or rattles on start-up can mean trouble. Watch the exhaust smoke; white vapour from a cold engine is normal provided it disappears as the temperature rises. Black smoke on heavy acceleration means dirty or worn injectors and blue smoke at any time indicates a badly worn engine – often through neglected maintenance. Avoid the car.

Road test

Listen for suspension rattles and clunks over rough roads. Check gear-change smoothness, also ensure that the cars steers straight ahead and brakes squarely. Try stopping at different rates – gently and rapidly. The engine should never stall as the car stops, nor

should the revs drop very low then pick up to the right idle speed. If it does, there's a problem with the management system.

Learn to walk away

Keep your head and reject a car with signs of problems. Cars are more often an emotional choice than a rational one, but the emotional choice is much more likely to end in tears. If you have any doubts at all, go home and sleep on it. If the salesperson hints at other buyers on the way, call their bluff – there are thousands more bargains out there.

Kim adds: It is also worth mentioning that if you are in any doubt about a car that you are serious considering, an independent check of the vehicle by a reputable organisation can be arranged and could confirm any suspicions or indeed put your mind at rest about it…

* The Motor Ombudsman, the automotive dispute resolution provider, has upgraded its website with the unveiling of its new Knowledge Base. (TheMotorOmbudsman.org/knowledge-base).

The introduction of the online tool comes as part of the body's commitment to make it quicker and simpler for motorists to resolve their queries and complaints in relation to buying and running a car.