



ROB SMITH
ADVISORY

BEFORE YOU SIGN

The Insider's Guide to
Buying Your Next Vehicle

THE RIGHT VEHICLE • FAIR TERMS • NO SURPRISES

40+ YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

Retail • Finance • Operations
Thousands of deals. Nearly every situation.

ROB SMITH

Experience You Can Put to Work.

RobSmithAdvisory.com

THE FOUNDATION BENEATH THIS BOOK

“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.”

— Colossians 3:23 (KJV)

My faith is not separate from the way I conduct business. It is the foundation beneath it.

I believe experience, influence and opportunity are God-given gifts, and I am accountable for how I use them. More than four decades in the automobile business have taught me lessons that can protect families, strengthen professionals and help people move forward.

This guide is one small way I can serve people with what I have been taught. My prayer is that it helps every reader approach the next transaction with wisdom, confidence, fairness and respect for everyone involved.

Use your gifts. Serve people well. Honor God in the process.

A Note From Rob

Why I Wrote This Book

For more than forty years, I have sat on almost every side of an automobile transaction. I have been the dealer trying to earn a customer's trust, the finance operator evaluating risk, the buyer trying to make the numbers work, and the owner responsible for what happened after everyone went home. The paperwork has changed. The technology has changed. Human nature has not.

People do not walk into a dealership hoping to make a bad decision. They walk in excited, nervous, rushed, hopeful—or sometimes desperate because the vehicle they depended on quit that morning. That mixture of emotion and urgency is exactly why a little preparation matters so much.

This is not a book about tricks. It is a book about judgment. Information is everywhere now. Judgment is knowing which information matters, which questions to ask and when to slow down before a signature turns a conversation into an obligation.

I love the automobile business.

I have watched a customer walk into a dealership worried that everyone was trying to take advantage of him—and drive away a few hours later hugging the salesperson who helped put the deal together. I have also watched a beautiful vehicle become a burden because the buyer focused on one number and never saw the complete transaction. The difference was rarely luck. It was preparation.

I love car dealerships, and I have tremendous respect for the people who work in them. Most dealership employees are hardworking professionals who care about their customers, their communities and their reputations. Modern dealerships operate in an intensely competitive, transparent environment, and the customer experience at many stores is second to none.

This guide is not about fighting the dealership, hiding information or preventing anyone from earning a fair profit. It is about helping you become a prepared, confident customer who understands the complete transaction and knows how to work collaboratively with good professionals.

A vehicle purchase can involve price, trade value, negative equity, taxes, financing, insurance products, factory incentives, warranties and dozens of smaller details. A good deal is not simply the lowest advertised price or monthly payment. It is the right vehicle, bought on fair terms, with no surprises after you sign.

My hope is that this guide helps you ask better questions, recognize genuine value and work collaboratively with a professional dealership. When the customer and dealer both understand the numbers, the transaction becomes faster, more transparent and more enjoyable for everyone.

The stories in this guide are composites. Names and identifying details are omitted, but the situations reflect patterns I have seen repeatedly across decades in retail, lending and operations. If you have bought or sold enough vehicles, you will recognize the people in them—and perhaps recognize yourself.

Rob Smith

Founder, Rob Smith Advisory

MY PROMISE

I will always advocate for a fair transaction—not an unreasonable one. Good dealerships deserve good customers, and good customers deserve clear information.

How to Use This Guide

Read it straight through before you begin shopping, or use the chapters as a reference while evaluating a particular vehicle. The worksheets at the end will help you organize the information before signing.

Section	What you will learn
1. Start With the Right Vehicle	Needs, lifestyle, equipment, fuel type and flexibility
2. New, Used or Certified	Depreciation, warranty, condition and ownership risk
3. The Dealership Is Not Your Enemy	How to create a professional, efficient transaction
4. Price and Market Value	Invoice, advertised price, auction data and fair profit
5. Incentives and Special Rates	Rebates versus subsidized financing and eligibility
6. Your Trade-In	Value, payoff, equity, damage and independent offers
7. Financing the Right Way	Prime and subprime credit, APR, term, LTV, DTI, PTI and payment
8. Leasing	When it works, mileage limits and true monthly cost
9. Fees and Products	Doc fees, soft adds, GAP, service contracts and maintenance
10. History, Warranty and Inspection	VIN, Carfax, recalls, coverage and pre-purchase inspection
11. Reading the Buyer's Order	The complete transaction on one page
12. When to Walk Away	Red flags and professional exits
Tools and Worksheets	Deal comparison, budget and final checklist

CHAPTER 1

Start With the Right Vehicle

The best transaction begins before anyone discusses price.

Many buyers begin with a specific vehicle they fell in love with online. That is understandable, but the first question should be whether the vehicle truly fits the buyer's life and finances.

Define the non-negotiables

- Realistic purchase-price range and comfortable monthly budget
- New, used or certified pre-owned
- Gasoline, diesel, hybrid, plug-in hybrid or electric
- Passenger capacity, cargo room, towing and body style
- Essential safety and driver-assistance equipment
- Expected annual mileage and fuel economy
- Preferred color and trim—but also acceptable alternatives
- How long the buyer realistically keeps vehicles

ROB'S RULE

No detail is too small. If a similar vehicle provides equivalent equipment, safety and ownership cost, flexibility can create real savings without compromising the customer's needs.

Look beyond the payment

A lower payment may simply mean a longer term, more cash down or a lease structure. Compare purchase price, amount financed, interest cost, expected maintenance, fuel, insurance and likely resale value—not payment alone.

From Rob's Desk: The Truck That Was Almost Right

A customer can fall in love with a vehicle long before the vehicle earns the right to be bought.

Picture a buyer who arrives determined to own a loaded pickup. It is beautiful, powerful and several hundred dollars beyond the payment that keeps his household comfortable. The salesperson is doing his job and the customer is doing what customers do: imagining the truck in his driveway.

Then somebody asks better questions. How often will he tow? How many people ride with him? How long does he normally keep a vehicle? What happens to the family budget when insurance, fuel and the first set of tires are included? A different truck—still one he is proud to own—does everything he truly needs and leaves room for life to happen.

That is not talking someone out of a sale. It is helping him buy the right vehicle. Great salespeople do this every day, and the customers they help tend to come back.

WHAT I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER

Do not confuse excitement with fit. The right vehicle should still feel right when the first payment, insurance bill and ordinary Tuesday all arrive.

CHAPTER 2

New, Used or Certified

Choose the risk profile that fits the buyer—not the sales pitch.

Choice

Primary trade-off

New	Full factory warranty, latest safety technology and access to factory incentives; greatest immediate depreciation.
Used	Lower acquisition cost and slower depreciation; condition, history and inspection become critical.
Certified pre-owned	Manufacturer-backed inspection and coverage may reduce risk, but compare the premium with a similar non-certified vehicle and independent warranty options.

Mileage is information, not an automatic rejection

There is no universal mileage cutoff. Year, maintenance, condition, intended use, market value and inspection results matter more than an arbitrary limit. High mileage must be priced appropriately, but low mileage does not guarantee a good vehicle.

New-vehicle essentials

- Confirm the exact VIN, trim, packages and equipment
- Request the window sticker and, when available, the dealer invoice
- Verify the current month's factory incentives for the customer's ZIP and eligibility
- Compare customer cash with special APR or lease programs
- Inspect the vehicle for transportation or lot damage before delivery

From Rob's Desk: Two Used Cars With the Same Miles

An odometer tells you how far a vehicle traveled. It does not tell you how it was treated.

Put two vehicles side by side with the same year and mileage. One has consistent service records, quality tires, a clean interior and a history that makes sense. The other has skipped maintenance, mismatched tires, unexplained bodywork and fluids that tell a different story.

On paper they can look nearly identical. In the real world, they are not remotely the same purchase. The better vehicle may cost more today and far less over the next three years. The cheaper one may be the most expensive bargain the customer ever buys.

This is why I refuse to create a magic mileage cutoff. Condition, care, history, price and inspection matter together.

WHAT I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER

Buy the vehicle's story, not merely its odometer. Documentation and inspection turn mileage from a fear into usable information.

CHAPTER 3