

Top 10 Tips for being a Happy Shopper at an Auto Swap Meet

By Jeff Zurschmeide

One of the Pacific Northwest's most prominent automotive journalists, Jeff's swap meet experience includes both emptying and filling his truck. He has authored [books on topics ranging from sports cars to welding](#).

Spring is coming, and for auto enthusiasts everywhere, that means one thing – swap meet season! In the Pacific Northwest where I live, the [Portland Swap Meet](#) is the meet with the most to offer, drawing tens of thousands of vendors and just plain folks with too much automotive stuff gather in April to buy, sell, trade, and spend a few days soaking up the car culture.

In participating in the meet for nearly 20 years both as a buyer and vendor, I've learned a few things about how to make the most of your time at a swap meet. Here are my Top 10 tips on how to enjoy the swap and get what you need:

- 1) **Be Prepared to Buy** – You need to have cash. There's just no way around it. Sellers don't know you well enough to take a check and even though many professional vendors accept credit cards, you can't count on that. Larger meets, like Portland, have ATMs on site, but to be safe, plan on bringing enough cash to buy what you want -- but not so much that an impulse purchase can ruin your life. Because I guarantee that you're going to see cars you want to buy.
- 2) **Be Prepared to Walk** – If you walk the entire meet at a swap the size of Portland, you'll put six to eight miles under your feet and look at upwards of 1500 individual stalls. Most big meets provide some sort of service to haul big parts to the gate or a holding/pickup area, but you still have to get yourself to the stalls. So wear comfortable shoes, lightweight clothes, and be prepared for the weather.
- 3) **Take Your Time** - If you walk the entire swap meet, you'll put six to eight miles under your feet, and look at upwards of 1500 individual stalls. You can do it in a day, but you'll be walking fast. If you have just one day, you better know what you're looking for – and you might miss the unexpected treasure.
- 4) **Be Efficient** – The flipside of taking your time is not wasting time – although time spent at the swap meet is rarely wasted. Take a look at your available time and the amount of ground to cover and you'll know about how much time you can spend in each building and in each section of the parking lot.
- 5) **Look Around** – Professional vendors buy enough space to display all their material, and they put it at a convenient level. But the best deals and the rarest parts at the swap are in non-professional stalls. The good stuff may be

- buried at the bottom of a bucket, or underneath a dirty trunk lid. Get in the habit of looking at everything in the stall.
- 6) **Make Notes** – If you see something you like, but the stall owner is away – and they often are away – make a note of the stall’s location and come back a little later. The same applies if you can’t strike a deal the first time around. Come back towards the end of the meet and you may find attitudes have changed. So take a pencil and paper with you when you go.
 - 7) **Have Tools** – A Leatherman, measuring tape, small crescent wrench, dial calipers, and a camera can make all the difference between buying the right part or the wrong one. If you’re looking for specific parts, have a photo, or an example part. If you think you’re going to buy a lot of things, a child’s wagon may seem silly at first but can be an invaluable tool. At a minimum, carry a backpack to hold your purchases, tools, water bottle and maybe some snacks.
 - 8) **Haggle** – Sometimes asking prices are firm, sometimes they’re negotiable. Sometimes people have crazy ideas about the value of junk, and sometimes you’ll find a treasure for just a buck or two. The point is, you’ll never know unless you ask. If you can’t strike a deal, don’t take it personally – that’s just the way it works.
 - 9) **Be Ready to Walk Away** – You need to know how much you’re willing and able to pay, and then stick to your gut. If a seller wants too much money for an item, it’s time to move on. Chances are you can find another one.
 - 10) **Be Ready to Compromise** – The other side of that last tip is that if you’re only apart by a few bucks, ask yourself if you’ll still care about those dollars in a year’s time. Would the extra \$5 for the right item really break your bank? Sometimes it’s better to pay a little too much and get what you want. Over the years I regret far more of the things I didn’t buy than those I did.

Really, that’s all there is to having a positive experience at the swap meet. I always encounter some interesting people, come home with some great stuff, learn something new about the automotive world, and get a good day’s exercise.

I’ll see you at the swap meet!

##