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Hunting Down New and Used Radio Gear
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Buying new or used equipment can be a daunting task for the experienced radio enthusiast, but even more so for folks new to the hobby. While certainly not a definitive guide, in this article I give advice on how to shop for new and used equipment, as well as tips to help avoid getting “taken” by less scrupulous sellers out there.

As an avid radio enthusiast and amateur radio operator, I have owned many different types of radios and associated radio equipment. From AM/FM broadcast radios to scanners, shortwave radios to amateur gear, and very old radios to some of the latest SDR equipment, I have purchased gear from many different sources. I have been very fortunate (and yes even lucky) in that very few purchases have been made from less-than-honest people. The few which were bad experiences certainly taught me some valuable lessons!

First Steps for New or Used Equipment

Whether buying new or used equipment there are some basic things to be done first. Let’s say you want to buy a portable shortwave receiver. Obviously, there are dozens and dozens to choose from varying in price, features, size, manufacturers and capabilities. The first step is to familiarize yourself with common features of portable shortwave receivers. I emphasize portable because they are quite different from tabletop receivers, with different designs and different performance expectations.

I cannot stress enough the value of research. Read everything you can get your hands on in whatever area of interest you have. Even if you consider yourself a total beginner, you can learn valuable things from the “pros” or people who have been in the hobby for a long time.

The fact you are reading this publication means you are already availing yourself of one of the best sources of information around. Every month there is a wealth of good information about all aspects of the radio hobby, including equipment. I say this as an avid reader of this publication, not only as a contributor!

This brings up an important point concerning our digital information age: not everyone who writes a review or gives advice knows what they are talking about! There is much anecdotal information out there, as well as personal bias, so use some discernment and try to find reliable sources. Just typing “best shortwave radio” in a common search engine brought up over a half-million results! Over time you will find favorite sites for reliable information.

(Speaking of search engines, my experience has been the first few pages of results usually give enough links to explore, that is, after one weeds through the “sponsored content” sales pitches!)

For example, using the search for a good portable shortwave receiver, one of the first to come up is Thomas Witherspoon’s SWLing Post site, which is an excellent resource (https://swling.com/blog/shortwave-radio-reviews). Thomas provides thorough reviews, including sound files for comparison of models or as demonstrations of features, and he is honest about flaws or weaknesses. There are other review sites which provide similar services, and these are the...
most valuable to someone looking for good information. Be a bit more skeptical of sites which use flowery language such as “irresistibly cute design” or “gorgeous ergonomics” but never really talk about performance.

This last part applies to any review/evaluation for any piece of radio gear. Features are nice, but it is performance that counts. One can buy an automobile for all the fancy features like heated seats, but if the car does not drive well or ends up in the shop all the time, the purchase was a mistake!

After researching various sources for information about portable shortwave radios and choosing a few models to explore, the best scenario is being able to try out several different radios to get a feel for how they operate and what features and operating methods feel best to you. If you are limited to handling radios in a store, the knowledge gained will be limited to weight, feel and ergonomics, all of which are useful, but will not tell you much about performance. Still, if the radio can be powered on and local stations on AM or FM can be heard, at least you will get an idea of the overall sound quality, which is certainly helpful. If you can borrow a radio or two from friends, you will get a much better education concerning the radio(s) which may help your decision-making process.

Assuming you are ready to make a purchase, you have finally reached the point where you will want to do some comparison shopping, as well as deciding between new or used. I will save my discussion of used equipment purchases for a little later in the article, except to say the used market tends to be based more on perceived value than actual value, so depending on the item, a used piece of equipment may go for as much as a new one, so look around a bit before snagging the first used item you see.

Here is my method in purchasing a new portable shortwave radio such as the Tecsun 660 (your mileage may vary as they say!): first, I would establish the going prices. Current prices for the rig run about $100-115 at most stores. Amazon, Universal Radio, eBay, Anon-co (a store known for excellent sales and service of Tecsun radios based on my research), and a number of other sources sell this radio for roughly the same price. At this point I would then make my choice based on price w/shiping, return policy, and speed of service.

The lowest price does not always equal the best choice of purchase simply because with any piece of modern equipment one must take into consideration, “What if this doesn’t work?” Regardless of a company’s reputation, there is always the possibility you can receive a lemon. I want to deal with a company whose return policy is clear and simple – I do not want to have to argue with someone or spend hours on the phone going through tech support when I know full-well something is defective. Make sure you understand return/exchange policies first before purchasing!

Shipping can be a hidden expense, particularly when “handling” is involved. I find it both sad and amusing when companies talk about “handling” charges – if they are in the business of selling things, why am I paying you to pull something from your warehouse?! But I digress. Just make sure you know fully what the charges are, as well as any “restocking” fees should you be unhappy with a product.

Also make sure to note if these apply to returns of defective equipment. Defective parts would be replaced, preferably at seller’s expense, but certainly a handling fee should not be charged. I tend to shop where return cost for defective equipment is covered by the seller. I should not have to pay shipping back for a defective product. But that’s me.

Finally, when dealing with new equipment especially, I often make my choice based on keeping smaller businesses in business. I appreciate the small mom and pop stores, particularly for radio equipment (and food!), and try to support them even if something is a few dollars more.

Buying new is often a balancing act between what you want, what you need, and what you might need in the future. Research, talking with other hobbyists, testing out equipment—all these things can help you make the right decisions on your purchase.

Used Equipment Purchases

For our purposes in this section I will approach this from the perspective of buying used amateur radio gear because most of the radio hobby can fit under the same tent. Research is key here just as with new equipment, but the criteria may be a bit different.

Internet searches are very useful, as long as one is careful not to be too influenced by any one review, or several reviews. An excellent resource for almost all things radio related is: http://www.eham.net/reviews eham.net is a useful site for learning about radios and their strengths and weaknesses based on real-world use. Not everyone who posts there is an expert(!), but with enough reviews you can usually form a decent opinion of a piece of equipment. If an item only has 5 reviews that may not tell you much, but if it has 25, 35 or 50 reviews you will likely learn the pros and cons of the equipment.

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There are items which may only have a few reviews, then one has to use good judgment in reviewing the reviewers – do they make sense, do they cover relevant issues, etc. Whenever you read a review from anywhere, try to judge whether the person is being fair or on a rampage; some folks will post negative reviews on a rig just because they may prefer ICOM over Kenwood. This is where doing some research before you buy helps.

If there is a known problem with a piece of equipment, assuming there are a reasonable number of reviews for the product on eHam, chances are good it will be mentioned by more than a few folks, as well as the solution to the problem.

The same thing holds true with the equipment-specific forums such as found at Yahoo Groups or Google Groups – forums are probably the best place for gathering information on a piece of equipment in which you are interested. If there is a known problem lots of people will post about it, as well as any solutions or work-arounds. This is an excellent way to get prepared to buy used equipment.

For information about a product or reviews, if you are an ARRL member you can go to the QST magazine archives and search for the product review of your target item. Not only will you get an in-depth analysis of it, but also what the retail price was when it was introduced. With a little online research, you will establish a baseline value of used equipment, which will then help you make a decision on if what the person is selling is worth the asking price.

Another good idea is to download a manual for the item which interests you, as almost every piece of equipment now has an available online manual. Do this for any and all pieces of equipment, as the manual can tell you a great deal of information to help in the decision-making process.

Reliable Sources

In terms of buying the actual equipment, your most reputable sources will be amateur radio dealers and private sales via club members. Next on the list for reputability are local hamfests and auctions. Then, finally, you’ve got online sites like QRZ, eBay, or Craigslist. With used equipment, it’s ‘Buyer Beware,’ so know what you are looking for, know its value, and know its pitfalls and limitations.

Have an idea of what you want before you go looking to buy? Take someone with you who knows equipment if possible. Are you considering used equipment? Ask an experienced ham what they think about it, or better yet, ask several folks. Bringing along a second set of eyes is good to help spot a problem you may overlook.

I say the following somewhat cautiously because used high-grade equipment can sometimes be purchased at a great price, but sometimes it is better to buy a lower level new product for now than to get burned on a higher grade older item. Even if the item is a good buy and seems to work properly, there is a reason sellers will often say “Sold as is, no returns.” Electronic equipment can go bad without warning. If you are new to the radio hobby and/or without some basic experience troubleshooting equipment, purchases of used high-end equipment can be risky.

When looking at old equipment like radios or amplifiers see if it works and test it out (or better, have someone who is knowledgeable do the testing). Buying used from a local or national radio store may be more expensive, but cheaper in the long run (R&L, Universal Radio, HRO, Gigaparts, Texas Towers, etc.) as they have likely gone over the equipment to ensure it meets saleable standards. Their reputation is on the line with every sale, and they want you back as a repeat customer.

Buying used from a club member is also potentially safer – most regular club members are good guys who want to keep a good reputation. Also, if you belong to a club, chances are good you can get someone’s help who is more experienced to talk with about your interests, needs, and goals. They can help steer you to the type of station you want to set up.

One of the things about buying used equipment with someone who has been a radio hobbyist for a while is that they may know some of the quirks, or issues, with an older radio or pieces of gear based on their experiences or what they have learned from other operators.

For example, an older radio might be known to have problems drifting off frequency (like the Swan 350, affectionately known as the Swan 3-drifty!). Or maybe a particular model tends to go bad in a radio, such as the Sony ICF-2010 where early models had issues with FETs going bad. Later models had additional diodes to protect the circuitry, but someone new to the hobby would not know that – they would only know the 2010s have a great reputation and are highly sought-after radios. Plus, experienced operators often know where to look for information on an old radio or amp, and can then find out things to look for when helping you
evaluate a rig.

Beware of people selling for a friend, or folks who bought something at a “yard sale” and are now selling it again. If someone says they don’t know much about it, chances are they don’t, and you don’t want to be the guinea pig. You want to be able to ask questions of the seller (or have another seasoned operator ask the questions who knows when someone is being less than forthright). If the seller doesn’t want to answer questions or acts like you are putting them out, move on to someone else. With used (or new) equipment, beware of the “sleazy used car salesman” approach; if the person sounds slick, they probably are in a bad way!

While on the subject of questions, here are some questions to ask: if you know of specific issues with a radio or piece of equipment, ask if the seller knows about the issue or experienced the problem – e.g. Kenwood TS-590S spike problem. (Early models of the Kenwood TS-590S had problems with a surge spike when keying an amplifier – because of research I knew of the problem, and that Kenwood offered a free fix; when buying a used TS-590S I knew to ask the seller if the unit had been serviced by Kenwood, and indeed it had. He even provided the receipt showing the service done.)

Ask about how the equipment was used – mobile, portable, at home; smoking or non-smoking environment (if smoke bothers you, the equipment may have to go through a period of cleaning and airing out, which may or may not be acceptable to you).

If buying an amplifier or an older tube radio, what are the conditions of the tubes, capacitors, etc. If solid-state equipment, are there any bands the radio has difficulty on or has low output power. These don’t have to be deal-breakers, but knowing what works or does not will certainly affect the price you are willing to pay.

If you cannot see the equipment in person, ask about the condition of the equipment and if the person selling would be willing to send photos. Just because a piece of equipment shows some mileage does not necessarily mean there are problems, but dented, rusted or oxidized equipment is likely in need of some real tender loving care to get back to full strength.

When I sell something, I try to let the potential buyers know as much about the true condition as possible, warts and all. I also let people know I would not sell anything I would not be willing to buy myself. There is nothing wrong with buying something with a known problem or problems, but at least you know what you are getting.

Here again, having someone knowledgeable to help make purchasing decisions is important – you may not know the extent of a needed repair, and what may be simple for one person is not so simple for another!

I strongly suggest that, if buying used, you make sure you can afford to lose the money if the piece of equipment turns out to be a dud. This can happen even when everyone is operating with the best of intentions. A friend of mine bought a used radio which tested fine, operated fine for several months, and then died. He sent it to a repairman specializing in his model radio and spent as much for the repair as he did originally buying the radio. Sadly, after about a year, the radio is acting up with a different, intermittent problem. He is not going to spend any more money on it.

While not a common experience, you must be willing to accept the risk when buying something used. Otherwise it is better to save the money or buy something less expensive, but buy new, where there will be a warranty you can rely on to protect the investment.

Local Hamfests

Local Hamfests are a great place to buy used equipment (and also new) because like the local radio club, people selling are often from the local community, and therefore concerned about their reputation. Certainly the Dayton Hamvention is an awesome event with incredible variety, and many good items may be found there. But for first-time buyers and folks new to the radio hobby, it can be all a bit overwhelming. Knowing what you want and what you are willing to pay helps, but I would not recommend it for a first-time buyer unless they are with someone experienced in the hobby.

Smallers, local hamfests may not have the variety, but they have a significant advantage for the newbie in that one is not likely to get inundated with information overload!

Buying Online

There are numerous options for buying used equipment online, from auction sites like eBay, retailers, Craigslist, QRZ, eHam classifieds, and so on. Again, I can only speak from my experiences, but these experiences have taught me a few things to look for as well as some things to avoid.

Buying online means one cannot see the item in person, test it, or meet the owner in person. In essence, you are buying “sight unseen” as the saying goes, except for whatever
When buying from retailers like R&L and HRO, their listings usually do not include photos. The advantage one has with these sellers is their desire to maintain a good reputation in the radio community. They do not want people running around in the hobby spreading bad reports about them. (Something to keep in mind is the difference between consignment sales and used sales of a retailer. Consignment means they are just selling something for their customers, they are making no claims themselves about the worthiness of a product.)

When buying from QRZ or eHam, eBay, Craigslist or the like, there are some red flags to avoid. First, if the site allows pictures, make sure you are seeing the actual item, and not the manufacturer’s “stock” image of the item. How can you tell? Well for one, if the item is on a white or otherwise pure background, chances are good it is a stock photo. If the photo looks professionally done, it probably is.

When I take a photo of something I want to sell, it looks like a home photo. There is usually something the item is sitting on which shows up in the photo, and likely something in the background which is visible to one degree or another. On QRZ.com for example, they have specific rules about having a photo of the actual object along with one’s call sign written or printed on a card, not super-imposed digitally on the image. This lets the buyer know the object is actually for sale, and not someone trying to get free money selling a phantom object using a stock photo.

Sparse descriptions are sometimes a red flag as well. If a person selling an item does not want to give me at least some relevant information about an item, I pass it by. QRZ and eHam sellers are usually good about giving some details (sometimes too good!), whereas eBay sellers sometimes give way too little. Just saying “Tested. Works.” Does not inspire much confidence in me. Someone who tells me “this item was pulled from use in my shack,” and then tells me details about its operation, gets my consideration.

If a site offers seller ratings like eBay, or a place where sellers can be reviewed like QRZ.com, these can be very helpful. Much like the reviews on eHam mentioned above, if a seller has overwhelmingly positive reviews, and dozens or hundreds of such reviews, you can be reasonably sure they are reliable.

On QRZ.com there is a forum for rating seller and buyer experiences. If I buy something from a good seller I leave a review, and as a seller I am always making sure a buyer is pleased with their purchase.

Since many electronic products are sold as-is, do not be surprised if sellers say “no returns accepted” in their listings. In recent years sellers have experienced many occasions where an item is sold, returned claiming item is broken or missing parts, only to find the buyer has removed or switched good parts for bad. This is a sad state of affairs, but it happens. Sites like eBay offer buyer protection on most sales, and this helps ensure if there is a problem with a purchase, eBay will help resolve it or give you your money back.

In any case, make sure what the terms are for an item arriving DOA—does the seller have a return policy, or is it sold “as-is” meaning no returns and you get whatever comes?

If you are buying from a source where the item will need to be shipped to you, make sure the seller is going to box it up properly. Things can get damaged easily in shipping, and a conscientious seller should want to take the time to package the item properly. At the same time, don’t whine about shipping costs if the person is going to do it right—double boxing is the norm for radios, amplifiers or anything susceptible to damage with rough handling. You should be prepared to pay well for shipping and insurance to make sure the item is covered properly.

Budget

Making a commitment to a radio is a big deal, but not so big that you should get into analysis paralysis: research and try out several radios if possible, fix a budget in your mind, and then stick to it. For example, your budget for an amateur radio station should include the radio, the power supply, the microphone, the antenna system, possibly a tuner and an SWR/power meter if working HF bands. We often think of the radio as the most important factor, but a radio without a power supply is useless. The same holds true for the antenna system. Without an appropriate antenna, a radio just sits there looking pretty.

In terms of a budget, you might want to think about several areas of the hobby at once. By buying used equipment you could be able to have an HF station, a mobile for the car, and a portable all for the money spent to buy a loaded new radio. Just something to consider!
The same holds true for other parts of the radio hobby. I recently took a chance on a used top-end scanner, and for the money I saved I was able to add two upgrades to the radio and still come out well below the price of the radio if purchased new. My budget calculations included the “what if” factor – what if the radio doesn’t work and I have to send it in for repairs? The company offers a flat rate repair price of $79, so I factored that in to the top price I would pay for the auction.

Final Thoughts

A few final thoughts and tips based on my experiences. Universal Radio, a retailer out of Ohio (and *TSM* advertiser), does a great job cataloging discontinued items and used equipment. Their online catalog is usually my first stop when looking for radio gear. The catalog will give you a good idea of a used item’s features, and also the retail value of it on the used market. eBay’s pricing is more market demand oriented, so the used values can vary depending on demand and availability. But between these two sites you’ll find a midpoint of true worth of a piece of used equipment.

Finding good new and used equipment takes diligence, patience, and a keen eye:

Looking Everywhere - Not only with keeping an eye on online listings like eBay and Craigslist; watch garage sales, estate sales, Goodwill/Salvation Army/St. Vincent DePaul stores, and flea markets. Radio equipment can show up in all these places. But when shopping in a nonstandard venue, be sure to look at the item with a critical eye, knowing that the equipment may need some work to make it operational.

Be patient. Having patience is a real advantage because it allows you to make good decisions and get the things you will enjoy for a long time to come.

Having a keen eye means not only seeing what is there, but also what is not there. Whether new or used, make sure the features you want are included, and when buying used, make sure everything is included that is supposed to be there. Many times I have caught ads for equipment where a power cord was missing, knobs or switches were missing, or something was broken which was not mentioned.

Buying new or used equipment is both challenging and fun! Every piece of equipment has its own personality, if you will, which makes using radio gear very enjoyable. Most folks in the radio hobby end up owning a great deal of gear over time as they progress in their interests, and some of us develop attachments to the gear we keep because of the memorable experiences we have while using them.

I almost envy the newcomer because it is all so fresh and exciting, but I would not trade my experiences for anything! Radio has been a wonderful hobby, and I look forward to many more years of enjoyment (and of playing with new and used gear!).