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HOW TO BUY A USED HAM RADIO WITHOUT MAKING A MISTAKE

A practical guide to finding a great deal, avoiding costly mistakes, and making a smart ham radio purchase.



Golden Rule

Never buy a used ham radio without seeing it in operation. A five-minute video call can reveal more than a hundred photos ever will.

Why Buy a Used Ham Radio?

One of the great advantages of amateur radio over many other hobbies is that quality equipment can remain on the air for decades. It is not uncommon to find transceivers that are 20 or even 30 years old still performing flawlessly thanks to solid construction and proper maintenance.

Buying used can allow you to:

- Own a high-end transceiver for the price of a new entry-level rig.
- Save anywhere from 30% to 60% off the original retail price.
- Find classic radios with outstanding reputations.
- Purchase legendary models that are no longer in production.

The key, however, is to buy wisely, not impulsively.

Do Your Homework Before You Buy

Never buy a radio simply because the price looks attractive.

Before contacting the seller, take the time to research the following:

- When was the radio manufactured?
- Does it have any well-known issues or common failures?
- Are replacement parts still available?
- Can it still be serviced or repaired?
- What is its current fair market value?

A little research beforehand can save you hundreds of dollars and prevent a great deal of frustration later.

Research Common Problems

Many radios have well-documented issues that are widely known within the amateur radio community.

For example:

- LCD displays that eventually fail.
- Worn or erratic tuning encoders.
- Faulty transmit/receive relays.
- Aging crystal or IF filters.
- Electrolytic capacitors that require replacement.

Knowing these common issues will allow you to ask the seller specific, informed questions instead of relying on general descriptions like "works great."

Ask About the Radio's History

A reputable seller should have no problem answering questions such as:

- How long have you owned it?
- Are you the original owner?
- Has it ever been repaired or serviced?
- Has it ever been damaged by lightning or a power surge?
- Was it used primarily for contesting?
- Has it been kept in a smoking environment?
- Was it used in a commercial or repeater station?

The answers can tell you a great deal about how well the radio has been cared for over the years.





Red Flags 🚩

- Price far below market value.
- Seller avoids questions.
- No recent photos or videos.
- "It should work" or "I think it works."
- Missing or altered serial number.
- Un documented modifications.

It is also a good idea to ask for clear photos of:

- The rear panel.
- All connectors and ports.
- The inside of the radio (if the seller is willing to remove the cover).
- The serial number label.

Request a Working Video

Today, there is no reason to purchase an expensive radio without seeing it operate first.

Ask the seller for a video showing:

- Powering on the radio.
- Receiving signals.
- Transmitting.
- Changing bands.
- Output power.
- S-meter activity.
- Menu operation.
- Audio quality.

Five minutes of video can save you from making a very expensive mistake.

Verify the Output Power

If the seller has access to a wattmeter, ask for a demonstration.

A 100-watt transceiver should deliver approximately that output level into a dummy load.

A significant difference may indicate:

- Damaged final transistors.
- Low supply voltage.
- ALC problems.
- Faults in the RF circuitry.

A radio that looks perfect on the outside may still have hidden problems, so a functional test is always worth the extra effort.

Be Wary of These Phrases

Certain statements should immediately raise a red flag.

- "It powers on, but I haven't tested it."
- "It should work."
- "I don't have an antenna to test it."
- "It just needs a minor adjustment."
- "I don't know much about the radio."

More often than not, what these phrases really mean is:

"Yes, it has problems."

Inspect the Photos Carefully

Pictures can often tell you far more than the seller's description.

Look closely for:

- Stripped screw heads.
- Mismatched screws.
- Dents or impact damage to the cabinet.
- Rust or oxidation.
- Corrosion.
- Signs of water or moisture damage.
- A worn or damaged display.
- Sunken or sticky buttons.
- Replacement knobs that do not match the originals.