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Planning A Car Audio System Installation

By Will Reece

With such a wide range of components and gadget on the market for car audio systems, the big question is "Where do I start?"

First you must decide what exactly you wish to do. If you are wanting to build a car audio system for a daily driver (the car you drive back and forth to work) with good sounds, but you are not interested in competing, a system can easily be put together for under \$1000. However, if you are looking for the all-out bass monster, be prepared to drop in some big bucks into your system.

One of the most important things to keep in mind when building a car audio system is planning. Get an idea of where you are going to place components, subwoofers, amplifiers, and power distribution. A lot of headache can be avoided with the proper planning!!

For the basic system, lets look at some of the components needed.

Let's first start with the head unit (CD player). Obviously you are going to want a nice head unit. If you start with a good quality cd player, and choose to upgrade your sound system in the future, purchase a head unit that will grow with you. Some of the features you may want to keep in mind are:

1. CD changer controls
2. XM / Sirius controls (if you decide to add Satellite radio in the future)
3. Dual RCA outputs (carries signal to the amplifiers)
4. Pause button (important for competing)
5. Detachable face, or other security devices
6. High voltage line driver – this will send the sound signal at a higher voltage to your amplifier/s reducing noise and improving overall sound quality.

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After you have chosen your head unit, you will want to make a decision on amplifiers and subwoofers. Keep in mind that you get what you pay for. A \$30 subwoofer will be as big as a \$300 subwoofer, but the capacities of each will differ greatly. Look at the power handling of each subwoofer and decide accordingly. You will want subwoofers will work with your amplifier/s (see compatibility).

You must also keep in mind the available space in your vehicle. Are you willing to give up your entire cargo area? How many subwoofers will fit? Decide on the size. Sizes will vary from 8" up to 18", some are square (Kicker), but most are round. Also keep in mind the resistance (ohms) of the subwoofer and make sure they are compatible with your amplifier/s (see compatibility). The subwoofer decision will also have an effect on the enclosure you decide to build or buy. For the basic system, I would recommend purchasing a pre-fabricated subwoofer enclosure. This will save you a bit of money and headache (especially if you end up building it two or three times!!). Make sure you take accurate measurement of your cargo area before building or buying an enclosure!!

Other components may be needed depending on the type of system you are building and how elaborate you want your sound to be. For the competition vehicle, figure on upgrading your alternator, adding a battery to your system (maybe more), running high quality RCA cables, power cables, ground cables, and speaker cable. You may need to add a capacitor to provide your amplifier with a reservoir of power for bigger hits from the subs. You may need an electronic crossover, an equalizer, replacement factory speakers, an amplifier for your mid-range and tweeters, additional speakers within your vehicle for staging, etc.

I have been involved in the car audio arena for several years, and have competed locally in the Kansas City area with USACi. You may find me online at

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Should I Buy Used Car Audio?

By Sebastian Schneider

Thanks to modern electronics, we now have, more than ever, multiple options for buying an audio system for our car. We only need to go to an electronics store like Best Buy or Circuit City and find tons of options. Or check the web. There are so many brands to choose from that it may drive you nuts.

So, today it isn't about what should you buy, but how much money do you have to invest in my car audio. It's a complex balance between what do you want and what can you really afford, especially if you are an enthusiast of these babies.

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Let's say that you have five hundred dollars. That let's you buy a decent receiver, an amplifier and a nice set of 4-way speakers. But reality says that you want more. Ok, you may buy this basic kit and save some more money until you have enough dollars to go for a subwoofer or a couple of tweeters with a dedicated amp. The thing is that you may not want to wait one or two years for it.

In that case, you should consider buying an used car audio system. For some men it may be considered as a sacrilege. After all, an audio system is considered by many of us as a physical manifestation of ourselves. It is the mean to make the world know what kind of music we hear.

But relax. You don't need to be such an extremist with used car audio. First things first. Look for some prices. One of the first places to look on is Ebay. You may find a good price on a complete used car audio kit. Another option is retail stores. Some years ago I found a complete kit: receiver, speakers and amplifiers for 60% of the price. Why? Because the guy who bought it didn't like how it sounded and spent more money on a more sophisticated system. But for me it was more than enough. This guy's bad choice was my bliss.

You can also check the classified ads in the newspaper. You will find lot's of local sellers looking for buyers for their used car audio. Electronics advances very quickly and consumers are so eager to use new technologies, that you will not find a shortage of them.

Finally, try your friends. Maybe they were already considering selling their system but needed a final push to do it. Ask those that have a good sounding system and check how much the same equipment would cost at a store.

At the end, it doesn't matter which source of used car audio you use, the thing is that you find yourself comfortable with the deal you have made. Not only on the bucks you have saved, but also feeling that your second hand system does sound good after all.

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