

## **A Short Course On Buying a Used Airplane A General Aviation News & Flyer Report**

### A Short Course on the Science of Buying a Used Airplane

ARLINGTON, Texas - As unlikely as it may sound, the secret to success in the aircraft sales business is not necessarily being a good salesman, according to Howard Van Bortel, owner of Van Bortel Aircraft, self-proclaimed "World's Largest Cessna Dealer."

(Who can argue? Van Bortel sold 200 aircraft in 1992, the majority of which were 172 models.)

"Today, the ability to find and determine whether an airplane is good or not is the key to business," Van Bortel explained, "because any good, low-time quality Cessna doesn't take any talent to sell."

Until the mid-1980s, there were thousands of airplanes coming out of Wichita every year. In those days, Van Bortel said, buyers focused on the components such as engines and radios when selecting an aircraft. Airframes were not a concern because all of them were fairly new then.

Now there are virtually no new aircraft although the demand may be there, the supply isn't and it's a dwindling number. Most airplanes 10 or 20 years old have been used heavily and are simply wearing out. Those not properly cared for have deteriorated and a number have been exported to more profitable locales abroad.

As a result, Van Bortel suggests that buyers may want to use the "Changing Priorities of the 1990s," a nine-point checklist that his dealership has developed to evaluate prospective aircraft.

Some excerpts, in descending order of importance:

No corrosion - The No. 1 indicator of condition, corrosion is irreversible in its deteriorating effects on an airframe. No history of damage - Think long and hard about buying an airplane with any damage, and then only if it is completely repaired and flown for a long time without any squawks.

Low airframe time - Not years, but hours as long as the first two priorities are met. Fewer than 750 hours is outstanding; more than 2,000 hours is getting used. As far as we are concerned, the more time on an airframe, the more maintenance it takes to keep it in good condition. And if you don't think that matters, consider how few cars with 200,000 miles or more on them are in good shape.

Hangared, with few owners - Too many owners during a short period of time may indicate some kind of dissatisfaction. An airplane is more desirable if it has been owned by a thoughtful person who valued it enough to keep it hangared, promptly fixed any problems and kept it in top shape.

Engine condition - Have a mechanic do a thorough inspection: compression, bore scope and oil analysis. If there is a problem, factor repair or replacement into the purchase price, but do not necessarily bypass a low-time aircraft that meets other criteria. Mechanical components - Inspect pulleys, linkages and other mechanical parts prior to purchase, not after.

Avionics - Given the competitive price of electronics in today's market, buying an airplane just for its avionics is not wise, but look for the value and functionality of what is there.

Interior - Look for good condition, function and comfort. If it is not there, it can be, so do not pass up an otherwise excellent airplane.

Price - This is last and probably least important because if you plan to find a airplane with a majority of the first eight criteria, plan to pay a premium. Good equipment is an infinitely more valuable asset than cheap equipment, especially down the road, when you may wish to sell; a quality airplane will better hold or increase its value more quickly than a substandard aircraft.

"We buy absolutely the lowest-time airplanes," Van Bortel said, "and they're getting more difficult to find. All of our customers' airplanes have appreciated in value. We'll sell an airplane that may be 45% over Bluebook value and the next year the customer sells it for more than we sold it to him."

While Van Bortel says he used to be extremely conservative in his approach with customers, encouraging them not to buy more airplane than they felt they needed, the markets of the past few years have caused him to change. "Now I'm seeing

customers look ahead because if you're buying a 172 and you think you're going to want, say, a 182RG two years from now, I'm saying maybe you ought to buy it now. It will never be cheaper and it's getting more and more difficult to find these airplanes. "If you can find the kind of airplane you want and you feel comfortable that it meets these criteria, go for it."

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