

What Do You Know About Your Avionics Shop?

10 Questions to Ask Before Selecting a Shop

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Different consumers act, well, differently — there's little doubt about that.

Where one might comparison shop looking for every penny of advantage, some show only casual interest in the most common question: How much?

But even price-centric buyers often fail to ask other questions with the potential for importance equal to or greater than the dollar signs on the invoice.

The answers to these questions can make a difference should problems arise, installation issues emerge, time become an issue or equipment fail to deliver as expected — among others.

So, what should you ask an avionics shop when seeking repair work, replacement work, a new piece of gear or a complete panel makeover?

Taking a non-scientific approach, we casually asked pilots and aircraft owners if there were questions they wished they'd asked before spending the bucks they'd spent on work, disappointing and satisfactory. We also conversed with individuals from avionics shops for common-sense questions buyers often fail to ask.

What follows is a collection of the 10 most common questions and the reasons for asking them.

No. 1:

Will the shop supply an itemized bid for materials and labor, and guarantee that price?

Shop owners, veteran technicians and experienced customers point out a variety of red flags if the answer is, "No," or if a detailed bid is only given reluctantly.

The details in a written bid should spell out exactly what you're buying, its costs, and the details and costs of any additional hardware or labor needed to work with the new equipment.

Being practiced in and providing detailed written bids can be an indication of a shop's experience. Only a written bid can help prevent unpleasant surprises about the price and the work required to make the desired change.

For example, prices quoted for a new IFR GPS generally don't cover installation, added indicators, additional switches, and changes to make the GPS compatible with an existing indicator or autopilot. Receiving a verbal quote for the GPS — or a written bid — without details of the additional costs can lead to an unhappy surprise when the invoice arrives.

No. 2:

Will any of the equipment be used, overhauled or reconditioned; if so, how will the shop warranty the equipment?

Some shop operators recommend avoiding used, overhauled and reconditioned gear. Other technicians maintain such gear can be an acceptable choice, saving the customer money.

Regardless, you should know up front whether the equipment and price in the bid includes gear that's not new — and what the differences are in cost, life expectancy and warranty coverage.

No. 3:

Are the technicians doing the work capable of performing the assigned task, or are they working under the supervision of a licensed supervisor or under the banner of a certified repair station?

Don't bother reading this if you think who works on your valuable, vulnerable airplane isn't an important consideration.

It's your airplane and your life, you deserve to know the qualifications of the technicians performing the work, how they are supervised, trained and quality checked, and how they affect the bid.

No. 4:

Is the shop a specialist in the hardware brands it is installing, and does the shop hold any special certification by the OEMs for training in their equipment?

Experience, experienced voices say, can save you hassles and money. By possessing experience in the equipment and work, the shop should be well beyond the learning-curve period and have a realistic handle on the time needed — as well as the ability to do the work in the shortest realistic timeframe.

Often, a specialized or certified shop has on hand any specialized tools or test gear needed for successful installation, troubleshooting and after-installation work. If there are any common post-installation issues typical to the work, the shop should be well versed in successfully resolving those issues.

Don't be afraid to ask how many other installations the shop has done on the equipment in which you're interested.

No. 5:

Does the shop have a pilot qualified to fly the finished airplane and check the hardware function and reliability, or will the owner be required to fly the airplane for the quality assurance flight?

The ideal, some maintain, is a shop with an experienced technician qualified to both check out and sign off the installation by flying the airplane personally.

A substantial number of technicians and customers counter that having a person experienced in the equipment and qualified to

sign off the work is more important than also being the PIC on the check flight.

Either way, you should know in advance and decide for yourself what you prefer.

No. 6:

Does the shop have in-stock what it needs to do the work; if not, does the shop have the resources to acquire those items?

Warnings on this point seem nearly universal: Avoid hiring a shop that needs you to bankroll the purchase of gear in advance.

A few recommend doing business only with vendors who maintain an inventory of whatever you happen to be buying. That may work for larger shops doing business at a high enough volume that tying up a huge amount of money in inventory isn't a problem.

For many a reputable shop, however, the investment in an extensive in-stock operation is prohibitive. Many of those reputable, qualified shops can pick up the phone, call the factory or distributor, and order what's needed for fast delivery without requiring the financial assistance of the customer.

No. 7:

Will the shop perform a system check to confirm the aircraft can safely support any additional loads imposed by the upgraded equipment, and include those needs in the bid?

As part of the decision-making process, you need to know whether or not the upgrade you are pricing will require any changes to suction-system

plumbing, electrical-system architecture or capacity, hydraulic or autopilot systems. You also need to know whether or not such needs are reflected in the bid you received.

It's best to know the answer to this question before signing for the work — as opposed to learning your dream project can't proceed without unanticipated work and expense.

No. 8:

Will the paperwork, logbook changes, manuals and warranty documents the shop supplies include any training materials for the new gear, and can the shop supply any training on its own?

Naturally, you should expect all the paperwork to be supplied and completed at the time you accept the aircraft.

Given the high degree of capability of much of today's new equipment — from autopilots and GPS navigators to multi-function primary flight and engine-health displays — basic training can be very important.

Your equipment maker might supply specific training aids with its new units; if so, you want to be certain you receive these aids.

Factory and third-party training also might be available — it would be helpful if your shop could offer recommendations at least, if not its own familiarization efforts. You'll get more for your money as your knowledge of the equipment increases.

No. 9:

Will the shop supply a written explanation of its warranty

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policies in addition to any warranty documentation accompanying the new equipment?

Shops use a variety of approaches regarding how they guarantee their work beyond the standard factory warranties accompanying new equipment.

You should know how they'll handle any complaints or problems that might arise because of their work, as well as who is responsible for labor and replacement equipment not covered by any OEM warranties.

Be forewarned: Laws governing warranties can vary from state to state; therefore, the answers you receive from shops in different locations might be governed by the laws of the state in which the work is done.

No. 10:

Will the shop supply a written outline of the dispute-resolution policies in the event of a disagreement concerning work, warranty or billing?

Some veterans recommend giving a second thought to any shop that can't provide at least a basic outline of its resolution practices and any terms and limitations, whether company policies or state law.

For example, some businesses invoke a policy requiring arbitration and precluding a suit to resolve a dispute between the customer and the shop. State laws might influence this or set limits of liability.

You want to know your rights and the mechanism for exercising those rights should an experience that started out on a good note go bad.

Forewarned is Forearmed

These are but a few suggestions for getting a better deal, avoiding problems stemming from a lack of knowledge, and improving your comfort zone the next time your bird needs work on its panel.

These are by no means, however, the only important questions you should ask.

Downtime also might be something important for you to know, and whether the shop will adjust its invoice for any delays within its power to prevent. How long a company has been in business is another worthy question.

Regardless of everything else you learn, never forget the No. 1 rule of picking a business for any expensive project: If the deal seems too good to be true, it probably is. Any bid that's wildly below other bids should be examined closely for what it may exclude or not cover.

As one responder suggested, following the insurance-industry habit has always worked well for him: Get three bids and go with the middle one. If all three are identical in content and reasonably close in price, going with the low bidder shouldn't hurt.

Happy shopping and safe flying. ■