

TEST LAB IN-CAR MP3



AN FM TRANSMITTER FOR YOUR MP3 PLAYER COULD COST MUCH LESS THAN REPLACING YOUR STEREO

In a world of ever more sophisticated MP3 players, in-car entertainment can feel as though it's stuck in the slow lane. Even if you're buying a brand new car there's a good chance you'll be charged extra for an iPod dock or USB connection point. And if your car's a few years old, chances are it will have, at best, a CD player, at worst an old-fashioned radio-cassette.

Replacing a car stereo can prove expensive, especially if you factor in the cost of installation. A much cheaper and more convenient option is an in-car FM transmitter. Plug your MP3 player into it and you can play back your music, via an FM signal, through the car radio.

But while some transmitters are quite cheap, several of the devices we've tested are Don't Buys.

Which? Best Buy

Belkin's TuneCast Auto Live (£50) is the only model we tested to make the Best Buy grade.

It can be controlled via the iPhone or through the device, and is very easy to use. An 'autoscan' feature searches for the best frequency, saving you from having to manually scan or search for presets while driving.

Sound quality and consistency are very good and a 'Pro setting' button allows you to select the audio setting that best suits what you are listening to. There are three music settings plus one for speech.

It's designed only for use with iPods and iPhones so is no good if you use another brand of music player.

It's widely available but we found it cheapest at Halfords.

Best of the rest

The next group all do a reasonable job but fall short of Best Buy standard either because they are difficult to use or the sound quality isn't great.

The Belkin Tunebase FM's hands-free feature (right) pauses the music when a call is received on your



iPhone. A built-in microphone allows you to speak, and the caller's voice plays through the car speakers. However, the iPhone has to be set to maximum to be heard.

The Gear4 CarDock has better sound quality, but is trickier to use. It's compatible with iPods, iPhones and other music players. If there's interference, the 'follow me' feature allows you to press the up/

down buttons to skip to the next preset and the radio automatically retunes.

Both have the power plug integrated into a solid mount (rather than a cable), so you may need to buy an extension lead to allow you to change the position of the music player.

The Griffin Roadtrip had the best sound consistency in our test, but it couldn't match the Belkins for ease of use.

Cassette converter

For cars with a cassette player, you can buy an adapter (£5-£15). A lead connects the 'cassette' to the headphone socket of your MP3 player which plays through the speakers.

A hard-wired alternative

A hard-wired adapter plugs in to the back of the radio. Cost will be a few pounds plus £30-£50 if you need to have it installed (depends on the car and radio).

Find the best MP3 player

Find the best MP3 or MP4 quickly and easily. We have expert reviews of 88 models, including 27 Best Buys and two Don't Buys at www.which.co.uk/mp3players

Ones to avoid

Four models were rated Don't Buys as they are all much harder to use. The Sendai XM-800 (below left) doesn't automatically search for the strongest frequencies but requires you to toggle through 14 presets to find the best. The Tecknet iPhone MT096 has very poor screen quality which fades when viewed at an angle. And the two lowest scorers, the Gear4 Airzone and the Tecknet FM11 (below right) are both particularly weak when it comes to sound consistency and quality respectively.



ON THE ROAD

Set the device up following the maker's instructions before you start your journey. Belkin and Griffin offer extra software to allow you to control them via the iPhone. These transmitters are small and can be fiddly, so trying to make adjustments while on the move could be a distraction too far. Transmitters vary in the way they allow you to find available frequencies. Autoscan searches automatically for the next available frequency. Frequency presets require you to set a range of frequencies, then scroll

through them manually to find the clearest signal. The transmission power of these devices is limited by European law, (to prevent them interfering with other devices) so you may need to position your device near to your car's external radio antenna. This low transmission power can mean that it will struggle to work well in major conurbations where it has to compete with lots of local radio stations across the frequency range. Some models connect to the headphone output and have no separate volume control. The sound can

become distorted if the volume on the player is too high. This can be compensated for by increasing volume on the radio. Some systems with essentially good sound quality don't maintain it consistently. A switch from stereo to mono can overcome some of this, especially when listening to speech. A large number of preset channels is no guarantee of quality. In our test, the transmitter with the most preset channels was also one of the poorest performers.

RANK	MODEL	PRICE (£)	SPECIFICATION					WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE					
			ANY COMPATIBLE WITH IPHONE/iPOD ^a	STEREO/MONO SWITCH ^b	COMPATIBLE WITH MUSIC PLAYER ^c	CHARGE WHILE CONNECTED?	NUMBER OF STORED FM FREQUENCIES	AUTOSCAN	SOUND QUALITY (STEREO/MONO SOUND)	SOUND CONSISTENCY	EASE OF INSTALLATION	EASE OF OPERATION	SCORE (%)
1	BELKIN TuneCast Auto LIVE F8Z498cH	50	✓		✓	✓	2	✓	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	81
2	BELKIN Tunebase FM with Hands Free	50	✓		✓	✓	2	✓	★★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★	63
3	GEAR4 CarDock FM 'Follow Me' PG361	30	✓	✓			5	✓ ^c	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★	63
4	GRIFFIN Roadtrip	50	✓		✓	✓	3	✓	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★	63
5	GRIFFIN iTrip with SmartScan	35	✓		✓	✓	3		★★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★	56
6	GRIFFIN iTrip Auto	30	✓		✓	✓	3	✓	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★	50
7	TECHNIKA FM Transmitter IFM-108	15		✓			10		★★★	★★★	★★★	★★	44
8	SENDAI XM-800	20		✓			14		★★★	★★★	★★	★★	38
9	TECKNET iPhone FM Transmitter MT-096	9	✓				None	✓	★★★	★★★	★★★	★	38
10	GEAR4 AirZone FM Dock PG301	30	✓				4		★★★	★★	★★★	★	31
11	TECKNET Wireless FM Transmitter FM11	10		✓			None		★★	★★★	★★	★★	31

^a Some transmitters don't work with all versions of iPod or iPhone. Check before buying. ^b Using 3.5mm jack lead ^c Only charges music players connected via the iPod connector

Score Ignores price and is based on: Sound quality and consistency (50%) Ease of use (50%)