

A few thoughts about choosing your DCC system

OK - Here we go... These are MY comments, based on my own experience

I'm sure some of you may disagree with me, so tell me so if that is the case! I'm also sure that there will be the odd modeller out there that has bought a unit listed in one of my "don'ts" and may be wondering about their purchase. Don't stress it - if you're happy that's fine, really!

On the upside, if you agree with me, have a positive story about any brand, or just want to tell the world about how you use DCC and how it has changed your modelling or the way you operate - get in touch! Our forum is a great place to share experiences and ideas!

Finally in this "preamble" - I am neither "all knowing", nor "always right", but I do say it like I see it - always. So, if I offend you or any manufacturer with what you see as an unfair negative comment, don't get mad - get on the phone or post in our forum!

OK, what's the next step?

Before you spend your hard-earned money, we suggest that you take a good look at what is available, talk to DCC users and find out more about the potential of DCC... After all, it's how well you plan that will set your direction for the future, and we hope that you and your DCC system will be working together for a long time! Here are a few suggestions on planning your change to DCC:

Remember that while there are entry level and up-market control systems available, their cost difference is not necessarily a significant part of the whole system - as you add decoders and accessories, the control becomes the core of your operations for everything, and "under-specifying" this may lead to compromise later.

1 - Think and learn about the main differences between DC and DCC: With DC you are tied to a control panel mentality and your operating position is "at the controls". You can also do this with DCC, but advanced systems use "hand-held" control units and can even be radio or Wi-Fi equipped, and therefore totally wireless, so you can "follow" and walk the layout with your trains. This is a big step, and a whole new way of operating, so spend some time thinking about it, and its potential for improving the pleasure you can get from your layout!

2 - Define your need - or at least try to: This is important as larger or smaller layouts have different needs. For example, if you will only ever have a few (less than say ten) locomotives and a small layout (say, less than 36sq feet) then a smaller system may be adequate. However, if you can, think also about your eventual use of the system - a higher featured main unit may initially look like overkill for simple loco driving but its added features and control ability may make it ideal for complex accessory control.

3 - Visit friends, clubs or layouts with DCC equipment: There is nothing like "hands on" to let you develop your own concept of "where can I go". No matter where in the world you are, if you can't find anyone local, ask on our forum and we will see if we can locate a DCC user close to you who can share their experiences and advise you.

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In my opinion, you should avoid the following:

1 - Untested second-hand units & second-hand units that don't carry a real guarantee.

The price may be good, but are they **really** fully functional? Is e-bay really your friend?

2 - Units from a "model train set" brand, unless you're **sure** they are fully compatible with DCC standards.

For example, early Hornby digital controllers were, to say the least, bad. Early Märklin, Fleischmann, MRC and some other similar units are functionally OK, but are limited in potential or unable to utilise all the benefits or "functions" on modern decoders. Also - they may contain "proprietary" non-standard features and **may** not be as adaptable to improvement or as flexible as a "full DCC brand" of controller.

3 - Beware entry-level "starter packs" from any train-set brand.

New modellers or "my first train set" people will buy these, and that is who they are targeted at - new modellers - but **you** are a modeller with a bit of DC experience, aren't you? So, it is best to avoid this "gentle trap".

I speak from experience here - I bought my first system from a "famous brand", but it was the bottom of their line. I soon found that it was frustrating to work with and as boring as setting a clock radio to use - within the first month, I relegated it to my test bench and bought a new full-feature system.

I later gave it away. Not a total loss, I suppose, but a cost I wouldn't have had if I'd planned and thought a little more!

4 - Avoid units that will **not** accept at least 4-digit loco numbers.

This allows you to use loco cab-side numbers as the loco number. This is really important... perhaps some people are happy with a small set of locos and don't mind remembering that loco 2318 is really loco 56 etc... However, will it really suit you when you have guests who don't know which loco is which?

I strongly recommend that where possible, numbers on smoke boxes or cab-sides are the address numbers of each loco on your control system. Easy to remember - easy to use - hard to forget! A simple thing that makes life easier!

5 - Think twice about units that require "scrolling" to change between locomotives or set up decoders (CVs).

It sounds like a small thing, but it is **so** much easier to peck out a number with a finger on a keypad than it is to scroll back and forth to choose a new loco! "Scrolling" units are usually entry-level, and as tedious as setting the clock after a power cut!

6 - Beware of units with limited address availability.

Again - these are mainly "train set" or "starter pack" brands, but believe me, when you get to loco 11 and only have 10 available spaces on your controller, you **will** regret the purchase, or quickly covet a new, more expandable unit.

7 - Are you **sure** you want a desktop unit?

I don't like to exclude **any** innovative brand from your shopping list - but handset controls can be more versatile, especially for larger layouts. This might eliminate some otherwise unique products, but it really can be very nice to walk around following your trains!

"All in one" products that contain both the controls and the "base station" electronics will tie you to a single operating

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Position and they **may** also limit potential for upgrading. In reality too, they are a “DC habit” - and are really a “change without changing” in operating style. Think carefully!

8 - Interconnectivity...

One of the **big** advantages of the full-feature “handset” products and better “console” types is the ability to interface with other digital devices... (for example - Apple or Android tablets or phones). If you already own such things, then for very little more (perhaps a wireless router connection and app) you can gain really nice additional control ability. Then... you can control or program **anything** from **anywhere** on the layout. But - be very sure that your chosen system **can** be interfaced easily and will allow easy integration. Do it before you get out your wallet, because while they might not say so on the box - some brands, surprisingly do **not** - and that includes one of the UK’s favourite brands. A real shame!

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