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Taking On the Internet Savvy Customer



By Steve Levin

A seasoned automotive sales veteran makes the case for updating the auto sales process by meeting the informed consumer halfway.

I would like to know: why in this day and age, when we are faced with customers coming in armed with printouts from Edmunds, Kelley Blue Book, Intellichoice or other dot coms, has the core strategy of our offline auto sales process not changed? Why aren't our salespeople prepared to go one-on-one with the customer who has spent 70 to 80 hours online learning about the bells and whistles, specifications and features of a particular vehicle in a model line? Why aren't we making the effort to train our salespeople in every last feature and benefit of our vehicles, so that they can keep up with our internet-savvy customers? And why isn't our sales staff learning how to benefit from their knowledge, which could lead to increasing customer respect for salespeople who acknowledge the features that matter most to them, personally?

Perhaps it's because the majority of dealerships still rely on the same old price-driven sales strategy, while our customers have become smart enough -- and fed up enough -- to move on. Experienced dealers know that this has been the modus operandi for more than two decades. But those of us who have been around long enough can also remember a time when we were all more knowledgeable than our customers; we remember the days when we used the Walk-Around Presentation to sell the value of our vehicles by showcasing the benefits of their built-in features. Our sales strategy then was value-based, much like the strategy that other luxury-based product categories continue to use (for example, the diamond jeweler, who sells his products based on the value of their cut, color and carats).

Every customer wants to meet a knowledgeable, professional, confident salesperson who's enthusiastic about the product(s) they represent, and can sell their value in a pleasant manner that's easy to understand. Don't you?

So how do we give our "green peas" the presentation skills and retrain our "price-driven" sales staff to deal with an information sensitive customer without it taking too sizeable an investment of time and money? Savvy manufacturers are resorting to the very same technology that has created the monster: the internet. And they are using new tools that harness the power of this highly customizable tool to recast the price-driven sales process of today into the value-driven process of (yesterday and) tomorrow.

Simply put, for us to keep up with this new and rapidly growing enlightened customer market, we need to switch gears and go back to emphasizing product knowledge with a greater focus on features and benefits training.

One example of available tools to help accomplish this goal is a web-based training classroom that can be accessed on-site at a dealership. And though this is a wonderful tool, it is limited to the time and retention power your sales staff has available during their working day-- chances are, that available time is considerably less than what the auto consumer can spend on their own research. Remember, the top American manufacturers have over 100 trim levels of cars, SUVs, vans and trucks within their model line. That's a lot to learn.

Other tools are starting to be developed that provide OEM's, dealers, and sales trainers with new avenues to help their sales staff to take advantage of the well-educated and tech-savvy auto consumer. Ideally, these methods combine proven learning tactics, such as repetition, with interactive training techniques that are more easily accessible to time-crunched salespeople.

Mobile technologies that leverage MP3 and CD formats in the sales process make on-the-go training a refreshing reality. Internet-based flash cards and/or audio components have been introduced into training modules as well, aiding in memory retention through repetition and sensory involvement. Another tool, the Motormouth™ Demo Ride Series, also utilizes the theory of repetition, by playing eight- to ten-minute, in-depth feature descriptions during the test drive. This simultaneously informs the customer about the performance, safety, comfort and convenience features of their chosen car and provides the salesperson with a reinforcement of his or her own vehicle knowledge.

These interactive techniques are simpler, less expensive and more accountable than traditional sales processes, helping to better inform, educate and train staff to deliver greater value to consumers.

With a realm of possibilities open to the dealership to overcome the problem cited as being the single greatest reason for declining gross profits in today's retail showrooms, proving to internet informed customers that you're as information savvy as they are needs to be taken seriously and resolved soon. With all the other obstacles facing dealerships today, this could mean the difference between a break-even month and a highly profitable one; staying status quo or gaining market share.

Steve Levin, president and creator of Motormouth, has spent over 30 years in the retail automotive industry. His experiences and frustrations behind the desk and on the showroom floor motivated the creation of S. N Automotive Consulting, Inc., where he has acted as a trouble-shooter for one of the leading mega-dealers in New Jersey, traveling to a variety of dealerships to "move the needle" wherever it needed moving. In this capacity he has had to train salespeople, fix problems and find better ways to make the dealerships more profitable.

Totally committed S. N Automotive Consulting, Steve looks forward to developing and providing new and alternative methods to help the automotive retail industry, gain the public's respect and overcome the distrust that has plagued this industry for years.