

Is your dealership phone the new Internet?

Something very interesting is going on in the automotive industry right now.

Phone call volume directly to dealerships from interested car buyers is climbing quickly, meanwhile e-leads and Internet activity is maintaining a baseline level. Why would this phone activity be happening so suddenly?

In our recent Wards article entitled "Tier Zero Gets Results" we shared how this buyer "speed" demand was beginning to show itself nationally. Our view is that smartphone ownership hitting a saturation point above 65% of the U.S. public has changed the game. Whenever a common technology reaches a saturation point it often begins to affect a consumer buying behavior.

Just as consumers are physically shopping fewer dealerships, sometimes as few as one store before they buy, consumers are now *e-shopping* fewer auto dealerships thanks to smartphone information. Having a smart phone in your hand allows buyers to *eliminate* dealerships. They can now view your complete inventory listing and don't even have to call to find this out. So in other words, your dealership is competing with other dealerships advertising and not their actual sales force as was in the past.

But the big question remains why are consumers calling on the phone again more often instead of submitting Internet leads?

One reason could be that they're growing impatient with the 3-hour Internet response time of automotive dealerships in comparison to other types of businesses like Amazon BestBuy.com and the like where their purchases are processed within seconds and delivery is set up within a minute.

Perhaps having the information that a consumer needs to begin choosing a dealership and having that data in their hand means that the only step left is to make sure that someone is waiting for them at the dealership. So maybe the consumer is just using the phone to verify that someone can show them the car that they have interested in when they arrive, or, just calling to verify that it's actually on the lot. Are they also calling from another dealership sales desk and just about to sign a deal? Sometimes.

The truth is that consumers today cross-pollinate their shopping habits from one category to the next. The Internet shopping phenomenon began and strengthened with the consumers purchasing their home using websites like Realtor.com or Zillow.com. Later, they transferred this habit to their next major purchase which of course is automobile. If you speak to realtors they can tell you how the consumer chooses house inventory and then calls a realtor to arrange a tour of that inventory. But in fact, the entire time the consumer stays in control what inventory they want to see.

I regularly secret shop client dealerships to see how they handle the live phone call. I want to see how long I am placed on hold, if they had the vehicle information available quickly, if they're able to maintain a charming, pleasant and warm conversation continually. Most times they do a fine job, but there are still misses.

BDC sales managers report that the average sales professionals able to handle a rolling average of about 150 leads per month. If this is true that means that they be processing 75 new leads from this month and also continuing to manage another 75 up to 150 leads from the prior two months.

If a sales professional is overwhelmed with ongoing conversation with current buyers it makes it difficult for him or her to easily communicate and manage more new calls. One of the most commonly seen choking points of the dealership today is the ability to process current sales past interested customers and also new leads.

Perhaps an intelligent way to take advantage of this new and recent trend is to immediately assess your phone-training program and higher professionals from similar industries with these needed skills.

Some industries that are very skilled at problem solving and phone negotiations exclusively are hotel and also telecommunications employees. I've also witnessed several dealers hiring mostly female BDC representatives due to their ability to outperform some of their male counterparts. These dealers sighted women's superior empathy with the customer and patience during buyer questions.

Finally, if we then accept this new expectation by the consumer today we should be analyzing our phone skills, the amount of people able to take live phone calls, the ability of our sales force to sell appointments, and the overall phone acumen and personal charm of our sales team.

These are just some of the things to consider as today's consumer continually expects faster service and 100% attention from your sales force.

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