

Survey: Dealers botch many Web leads

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LOS ANGELES — Sales leads generated by e-mail or Web sites should generate promising showroom traffic. But many dealerships fail to respond properly to queries within 24 hours — if they respond at all, a consultant says.

Ninety percent of Internet customers received some sort of response, but usually it's the e-mail equivalent of a form letter, according to a survey by Pied Piper Management Co. of Monterey, Calif.

Thirty-six percent of specific questions from customers went unanswered within 24 hours, says Pied Piper, which audits various business functions for dealerships.

Pied Piper submitted Internet inquiries to 2,816 dealerships from September 2010 to March 2011.

"The most successful brands and dealers have discovered the Internet is no longer incremental business — it's *the* business," says Fran O'Hagan, CEO of Pied Piper. "If salespeople on the floor ignored four out of 10 customers walking through the



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door, there would be hell to pay."

As expected from brands that focus on customer service, luxury brands fared best when responding to Internet leads. Regarding the top finisher, O'Hagan notes: "Lexus doesn't wake up hungrier. They just have a better system in place."

Eighty percent of car buyers do online research before visiting a dealership. But salespeople often fail to follow up their dealership's auto-response or e-mail form letter promptly with a personal e-mail or phone communication, O'Hagan says.

And dealerships' auto-response templates often are set up incorrectly. The return e-mail says, "Dear Insert Name Here," instead of placing the customer's name in the returning message.

A few brand-related highlights of the survey:

■ Mini stores were worst at responding to specific questions within 30 minutes but the best at responding within 24 hours.

■ Honda dealers were tops at providing specific price quotes, setting up dealership appointments and providing compelling reasons to visit a specific store.

■ All four Chrysler LLC brands finished near the bottom of the brand rankings.

■ While Toyota and Lexus fared well in responding to consumer queries, the supposedly Internet-savvy Scion youth brand did poorly.

Scion General Manager Jack Hollis expressed concern over the Pied Piper results. He said Toyota's internal surveys show Scion responds faster and more comprehensively than Toyota or Lexus.

"E-leads are a priority for Scion, because our customers are more connected," Hollis said. He noted that Toyota dealerships usually have the same Internet salesperson responding to Toyota and Scion Internet leads. **AN**