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Car shoppers rate stores

Survey shows luxury brand dealers give customers best treatment

Christine Tierney / The Detroit News

Dealers selling Honda Motor Co.'s premium Acura vehicles won the highest marks from car shoppers in a recent survey, followed by Land Rover, Saturn, Jaguar and Volkswagen stores.

At the other end of the spectrum, Cadillac, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Ford, Jeep, Lincoln, Kia and Scion scored poorly, according to the poll conducted in the spring by Pied Piper Management Co. of Pacific Grove, Calif.

Fran O'Hagan, president of Pied Piper, said the brands with the highest ratings also tended to have higher sales and profits.

"We found that eight of the top 10 brands averaged more than 250 units per year, and only three of the 10 lowest rated brands averaged more than 250 units," he said. "There are exceptions, but still, it makes me think those numbers are a proxy for dealer profitability."

The survey's findings dispelled a deeply rooted myth about the business, he said.

While most people associate car shopping with overbearing sales staffers, "the reality is, it's four times more likely for a customer leaving the dealership to feel that they were undersold than oversold," he said.

Other surveys measure car owners' satisfaction with their dealers and dealer service, but O'Hagan said his study is the first that gauges prospective car buyers' fresh impressions.

Pied Piper surveyed shoppers at 1,592 dealerships.

O'Hagan said Acura, the top-rated brand, showed a high level of consistency, with survey respondents giving dealers high marks across the board. Of the 55 attributes measured, "they were always up in the top five or six," he said. In addition, there weren't sharp variations in the scores of individual Acura dealers.

Chip Elliott, a sales manager at Suburban Acura in Farmington Hills, said the store strives to achieve the right balance. Staffers don't go out to the parking lot to greet visitors as they pull in.

"Once they come into the dealership, there's a meet-and-greet," Elliott said. "If they choose to be left alone, that's OK. We stay close by for questions or concerns, until we can take it to the next level."

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Top 10

The top auto brands rated by prospective car shoppers:

- Acura
- Land Rover
- Saturn
- Jaguar
- VW
- Nissan
- Saab
- Audi
- BMW
- Lexus

Source: Pied Piper Management Co.

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