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Dealers Improving Shopper Satisfaction Levels

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PACIFIC GROVE, Calif. — If a recent study is any indication, consumers are more pleased with the way they have been treated by dealers than they were just one year ago.

As many automakers know, sales success is strongly tied to how their dealers act toward shoppers, the 2008 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index U.S. Auto Industry Study suggested.



Essentially, the study hired anonymous shoppers to visit major brands' dealerships throughout the country and then evaluated how they were treated. The results were then calculated and reported through the Pied Piper PSI process.

Twenty-four of the 37 brands tested improved upon their PSI score from 2007, the data showed.



Interestingly enough, of the top 10 U.S. brands that show improved year-to-date sales in 2008, eight also either maintained or enhanced their PSI score.

Moreover, eight of the 10 with the worst sales declines also decreased in shopper satisfaction.

Among all brands, Acura dealerships scored the highest, with Saturn, Lexus and Jaguar following close behind.

Also, brands leading the overall industry improvement in shopper satisfaction were four of the top five volume sellers: Ford, Chevrolet, Toyota and Honda.

So, how have dealerships improved?

For one, sales representatives were more apt to discuss all the available financing options, handle waiting periods "professionally" and simplify special orders.

Salespeople were less likely to ask questions regarding why a consumer was considering a specific brand, a shopper's price range or to even try to determine how and by whom a vehicle would be used.

"Today's typical auto shopping experience is far different from the experience even five years ago, and many dealerships are changing the way they sell cars as a result," explained Fran O'Hagan, president of Pied Piper Management Co.

"Today's shoppers arrive at a dealership already armed with facts and figures, but in the end the dealership and salesperson still play a critical role in helping shoppers turn that raw information into the best match for the shopper's needs and desires," O'Hagan added.

Additionally, the study found that dealers were more likely to suggest brands different than the one the shopper requested.

For instance, consumers looking for Chrysler, Scion, Dodge, Lincoln and Kia were the most likely to have salespeople suggest they might want to consider an alternative brand.

"We find that salespeople from stand-alone dealerships suggest alternative brands less than 5 percent of the time," O'Hagan illustrated. "In contrast, for brands predominantly sold in multi-brand dealerships, salespeople suggest alternative brands more than 20 percent of the time."

Breaking it down further, showing substantial improvements in PSI score were Lexus, Cadillac, Ford, Mazda, Scion, Jeep and Suzuki.

Meanwhile, the biggest drop-offs were experienced by Mitsubishi, Pontiac, Mini, Hummer and Land Rover.

Analyzing various criteria, Acura scored the highest for focusing attention on three to five benefits/features. Jaguar dealerships were No. 1 in offering brochures or a business card, and Lexus was tops in asking for contact information.

Saturn sales personnel, meanwhile, ranked first for introducing themselves.

Finally, the study also discussed shoppers' experiences when they contacted dealerships by phone, Internet or e-mail.

According to the data, 64 percent of dealers responded to Internet or e-mail requests within 24 hours.

When dealerships responded via e-mail, 47 percent gave reasons other than price to buy from their store, 66 percent offered a price quote and 59 percent encouraged shoppers to visit the store.

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