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Dealers Treat Shoppers Better

By Steve Finlay
 WardsAuto.com, Jul 8, 2008 10:26 AM

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Most car dealerships are treating their customers better, according to an annual satisfaction study using mystery shoppers.

Acura, Jaguar, Lexus and Saturn dealerships rank highest in the 2008 Pied Piper Management Co. review, in which people were hired to pose as shoppers, visit auto dealerships, then calculate and report their findings on how they were treated.

The new study shows a brand or dealership's efforts to improve shopper treatment parallels retail-sales success.

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Of U.S. car brands that improved their 2008 year-to-date retail sales, eight of the top 10 brands also increased or maintained satisfaction scores from 2007 to 2008.

Of the 10 car brands with the worst year-to-date sales performance, eight saw their satisfaction scores decrease from year to year.

This year, auto sales people were more likely to:

- Mention the availability of different financing options.
- Handle any required wait professionally.
- Make special orders simple and easy.

But despite the overall improvements, sales people this year were less likely to ask certain fact-finding questions such as:

- Why the shopper was considering the particular brand.
- What the customer's price range was.
- How the vehicle would be used and by whom.

Using the answers to those so-called qualifying questions often helps a sales person direct a customer to the right vehicle, enhancing both satisfaction scores and the prospects of making a sale.

"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," says Pied Piper President Fran O'Hagan.

Today's shoppers arrive at a dealership already armed with facts and figures, often garnered from research, especially on the Internet.

"But in the end, the dealership and sales person 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 says.

Sales people also were more likely this year to suggest an alternative brand than the one requested by the shopper.

Of the 37 brands evaluated, 24 maintained or improved their overall dealership performance of the previous year's study.

Overall industry gain was led by four of the top five sales-volume brands, with Ford, Chevrolet, Toyota and Honda all recording improvement.

Brands recording substantial gains from 2007 to 2008 included Lexus, Cadillac, Ford, Mazda, Scion, Jeep and Suzuki.

Brands recording the greatest declines over the previous year were Mitsubishi, Pontiac, Mini, Hummer and Land Rover.

For domestic multi-brand auto makers, Ford Motor Co. stores led the way with improvements from Ford, Lincoln and Mercury and no change for Volvo.

The results were mixed for General Motors Corp. dealerships, with solid improvement for Chevrolet and Cadillac but declines for Saturn, GMC, Saab, Buick, Hummer and Pontiac.

Chrysler LLC's Jeep brand improved dealership performance, while the Dodge and Chrysler brands recorded lower scores compared with the previous year.

Among the top scoring brands, Acura sales people ranked first for focusing attention on three to five memorable features and benefits.

Jaguar sales people ranked first for offering a business card or brochure; Lexus sales staffers ranked first for asking for contact information; and Saturn showroom personnel ranked first for introducing themselves.

Industry newcomer Smart led all other brands for four of the measured sales process attributes, yet finished last for 10 other attributes.

The 2008 study marked the first time Pied Piper measured not only how shoppers were treated at the dealership, but also how they were treated when contacting stores by phone and email.

Results varied substantially by brand. Sixty-four percent of dealerships responded to Internet inquires within 24 hours.

Leading the way were dealerships from Infiniti, Cadillac, Lexus, Mercury, Saturn, Porsche, Ford and Acura; all of which responded within 24 hours more than 80% of the time.

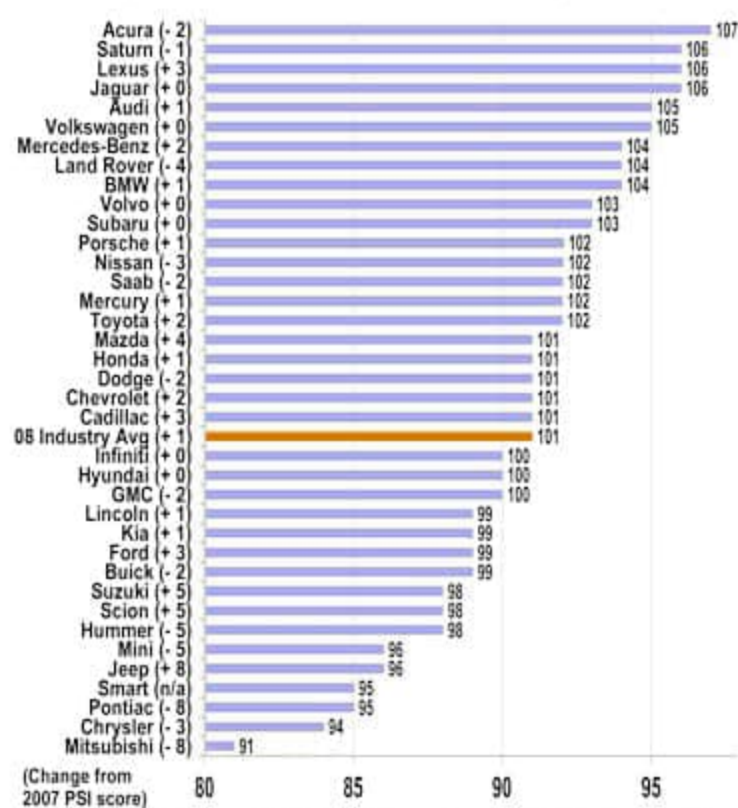
In contrast, dealers from 10 brands responded within 24 hours less than 50% of the time.

Prompt email replies are considered crucial to the success of a dealership's Internet sales efforts.

Of the dealerships that responded by email, on average 47% cited reasons to buy from them other than just price; 66% gave a price quote; and 59% urged shoppers to visit the dealership in person.

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2008 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index[®] U.S. Auto Industry Study Top Auto Brands for Pied Piper PSI[®]



Source: 2008 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index U.S. Auto Industry Study.