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## America's Best Auto Dealerships

Hannah Elliott, 07.13.09, 11:45 AM EDT

**Luxury brands offer a better experience in the showroom.**



**In Depth: America's Best Auto Dealerships**

Todd Agostini is glad that luxury auto sales are down right now. The sales manager at the Jaguar dealership in Cherry Hill, N.J., Agostini says that Jags take a discerning eye to appreciate. And the heady times before the credit crunch were bringing in too much riff-raff—customers who didn't fully understand the brand or the cars themselves.

"We couldn't stand selling cars to people who really didn't have any business in our car," says Agostini. "Not that we didn't like the people at all, but it hurts the brand."

It sounds elitist, but Cherry Hill is the No. 17 Jaguar dealer in the country, and No. 1 for used Jaguar sales. The dealership has been able to remain profitable, so far, in an auto market with new-car sales down 36% from last year.

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It's partly the cars that keeps customers coming, sure, but it's also the experience those customers have in the showroom. While **General Motors** ([GMGMQ.PK - news - people](#)) and Chrysler are closing roughly 1,100 and 800 dealerships nationwide, respectively (and surviving dealerships conjure ways to attract their customers), Jaguar joins several other luxury brands in shining through the recession's haze.

Mercedes-Benz, Lexus and Jaguar are the top three brands when it comes to consumer satisfaction at their dealerships. Along with Saturn and Land Rover, they round out the top five in our list of the best dealerships in the country.

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#### Behind the Numbers

To generate our list of the best car dealerships this year, we used data provided by Pied Piper Management, a California-based marketing firm. The numbers were collected between July 2008 and June 2009 using 3,531 anonymous shoppers at dealerships of every automotive brand, nationwide. The prospective car buyers were questioned on many aspects of their experiences at the dealerships, from whether a salesperson smiled to whether they were offered a brochure to whether they planned to purchase a vehicle from that particular showroom.

Pied Pier analysts then used that information to evaluate how effectively a dealership sells cars, to compare particular sales processes to industry benchmarks and to identify deficiencies in certain brands. Each brand was then given a score as a factor of overall sales effectiveness, with a higher score meaning better sales rates, as well as a greater likelihood of brand-exclusive dealerships.

Nine of the 10 highest-scoring brands on our list are in the luxury category; Saturn is the lone exception. Only one of the luxury brands, Cadillac, is from an American automaker.

Fran O'Hagan, president of Pied Piper, says luxury brands are more effective with auto sales because their salespeople earn higher commissions per sale and are willing and able to devote more time and attention to individual shoppers.

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Longo Toyota, a dealership near Los Angeles, for instance, is the largest dealership in the U.S. It sells more than 15,000 new cars a year, and shoppers there know that if they want to buy a Camry, they can choose from multiple colors and options and drive one off the lot that day. It's all about the transaction, O'Hagan says.

It's not so with luxury dealerships. "They attract a different type of person," O'Hagan says. "The visit may take two or three times longer than at Longo, but the salesperson is happy to devote that time. People who want to make their living selling Jags or Mercedes tend to be a different type than the people who make their living selling something at a higher volume."

Indeed, Agostini says his typical buyer has already bought two or three vehicles at the Cherry Hill dealership, and routinely invites salespeople to dinner or to week-long vacations at beach houses nearby.

Changing the Face of Car Sales

The industry average for sales effectiveness has increased dramatically across all types of dealerships, according to Pied Piper, thanks to an economy that forces salespeople to be more vigilant on the showroom floor, O'Hagan says.

The nature of what a salesperson must be in order to close a sale, especially in the luxury sector, has changed, too. While it's still true that shoppers buy from people they like, salespeople are facing a much more educated and sophisticated buying public.

It's not enough to know the product—they've got to convince a prospective buyer that a Mercedes, say, is better than a Lexus, when so much specific, in-depth information is widely available for both types of cars.

"Product knowledge is dramatically less important than it used to be," O'Hagan says. "It's much more [a question of] 'What can the salesperson do for me?'"

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Speed



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### No. 1: Mercedes-Benz

2009 Score: 110

2008 Score: 104

2007 Score: 102

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### No. 2 (tie): Jaguar

2009 Score: 108

2008 Score: 106

2007 Score: 106

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### No. 2 (tie): Lexus

2009 Score: 108

2008 Score: 106

2007 Score: 103

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### No. 4 (tie) Saturn

2009 Score: 107

2008 Score: 106

2007 Score: 107

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## No. 4 (tie) Land Rover

2009 Score: 107

2008 Score: 103

2007 Score: 108

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### No. 6: Acura

2009 Score: 106

2008 Score: 107

2007 Score: 109

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## No. 7: Audi

2009 Score: 105

2008 Score: 105

2007 Score: 104

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## No. 8 (tie): Subaru

2009 Score: 104  
2008 Score: 103  
2007 Score: 103

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### No. 8 (tie): Volkswagen

2009 Score: 104

2008 Score: 105

2007 Score: 105

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### No. 8 (tie): Porsche

2009 Score: 104

2008 Score: 102

2007 Score: 101

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### No. 8 (tie) BMW

2009 Score: 104

2008 Score: 104

2007 Score: 103

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### No. 8 (tie): Cadillac

2009 Score: 104

2008 Score: 101

2007 Score: 98

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### No. 8 (tie): Toyota

2009 Score: 104

2008 Score: 102

2007 Score: 100

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