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Which Brands' Dealers Treat In-Person Prospects the Best?

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PACIFIC GROVE, Calif. — In an effort to see which automakers' dealers are treating vehicle shoppers the best, Pied Piper recently sent more than 3,000 mystery shoppers into various dealerships and measured the feedback.

And the dealers who gained the best marks? According to the company, they are Mercedes-Benz dealers.



Next in line were dealers from Lexus, Jaguar, Saturn and Land Rover, respectively.

The 2009 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index found that a brand or dealership's treatment of shoppers tended to parallel retail sales success.

"Eight of the top 10 brands when ranked by PSI (a patent-pending process used to compile the results) also gained market share from 2008 to 2009, while eight of the bottom 10 brands when ranked by PSI lost market share from 2008 to 2009," officials explained.

"Overall, auto industry performance improved notably from 2008 to 2009, with 30 of the 37 major auto brands achieving higher PSI scores," they went on to note.

Luxury brands took home nine of the top 10 positions, with General Motors' Saturn dealerships representing the only non-luxury brand, as well as one of the two, along with Cadillac, top 10 brands owned by a U.S. company. Of note, Penske recently struck a deal with GM to purchase Saturn.

Overall, officials explained that the industry gain was led by improvement from all five of the top five sales volume brands, including Toyota, Ford, Chevrolet, Honda and Nissan.

Other brands showing the most improvement year-over-year were Mercedes-Benz, Mini, Smart and Chrysler.

Interestingly enough, of the "orphan" brands that are slated for sale or closure, executives found that Saturn finished "well-above" the industry average. Volvo scored at the industry average, while Hummer came in below the median. Saab and Pontiac also both scored "well-below" the industry average.

Fran O'Hagan, chief executive officer of Pied Piper Management Co., noted, "Nine out of 10 car shoppers walk back out a dealership's door without buying. The economic climate of the past year has clearly encouraged salespeople to be more helpful to the majority of shoppers who aren't yet ready to buy, but still need help narrowing down their selection."

In other findings, the company discovered:

- Salespeople were 14 percent more likely this year to ask about obstacles preventing purchase.
- Sales professionals were 13 percent more likely to mention certified pre-owned units.
- Sales personnel were 13 percent more likely to offer compelling reasons why it would be in a shopper's best interest to purchase now.
- Salespeople were 9 percent more likely to ask shoppers what attracted them to this brand.
- And 9 percent of sales personnel were more likely to mention the availability of different financing options.

On the other side of the coin, salespeople were less likely:

- To offer a brochure.
- Make the process of special ordering an out-stock-vehicle seem simple and easy.

Another interesting tidbit discovered is that as many as one-third of a brand's car shoppers indicated that their salesperson suggested that they consider an alternative brand carried by the dealership or dealer group rather than the requested brand.

Shoppers seeking information on Dodge, GMC, Chrysler, Kia and Pontiac were the most likely to be pointed toward another brand by sales personnel.

However, dealer salespeople from Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Volvo, Lexus and Honda were the least likely to suggest another brand.

The study was conducted between July 2008 and June 2009, using 3,531 hired anonymous mystery shoppers.

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