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Car dealers see how to seal deal with secret shopper study

Sales experience at Ford, others praised

BY JEWEL GOPWANI
 FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

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A host of mystery shoppers sent to critique dealerships across the country gave luxury brands such as Mercedes-Benz and Lexus high marks and put Ford and Lincoln above the industry average.

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Pied Piper Management sent secret shoppers to 3,658 dealerships and scored automotive brands based on the sales experience. It used more than 50 factors, including how often salespeople asked about the customer's needs and discussed financing options. The chart below starts at the industry average.



Note: Buick, Chrysler, Dodge, GMC, Hyundai, Jeep, Kia, Mercury, Mini, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Porsche, Saab, Scion, Smart and Subaru all scored below the industry average. Source: Pied Piper Management Co. Detroit Free Press

Graphic: Brands ranked by sales experience (click to see larger version)

A version of this story appears on page 4-A of the Monday, July 12, 2010, print edition of the Detroit Free Press.

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The study of dealerships, to be released today, also found that fewer salespeople offer vehicle brochures that customers can take home. Only 57% of dealerships offer brochures, compared with 62% in 2007.

"I'm absolutely certain that paper brochures help sell cars," said Fran O'Hagan, CEO of Pied Piper Management, which is based in Monterey, Calif., and conducted the study.

Now in its fourth year, the study aims to help automakers and dealers determine how to boost sales. Improving the sales experience at dealerships is essential at a time when dealerships across the country

are recovering after GM and Chrysler reduced the number of dealerships.

Moreover, dealers may have to work harder to sell cars during the second half of the year, as many potential car buyers may still be holding off on vehicle purchases.

Pied Piper's study zeros in on tangible things a dealership can do to influence a sale.

The firm deployed 3,658 secret shoppers, ages 21 to 65, to dealerships between July 2009 and June 2010 to collect more than 50 observations, such as whether a salesperson:

- Asked how the shopper would use a new vehicle and who would be driving.
- Offered a test drive.
- Was knowledgeable about the product.

Using that data, Pied Piper gave each brand a score and a rank.

Lincoln's score jumped 4%, more than any other brand, compared with its rank in 2009. Lincoln's salespeople were more likely to talk about a vehicle's features and ask why the shopper considered the brand.

O'Hagan said salespeople need to do more to involve shoppers, such as finding out more about a customer's needs and walking a shopper around a car, pointing out important features.

Salespeople need to, O'Hagan said, "engage the shopper in some way that isn't just me lecturing them."

Contact JEWEL GOPWANI: 313-223-4550 or jgopwani@freepress.com

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