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Home » Dealers

## Mercedes dealers ranked most customer-friendly; Ford, Chevy gain

Diana T. Kurylko

Automotive News -- July 12, 2010 - 1:22 pm ET

UPDATED: 7/12/10 3:40 p.m. ET

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A study measuring how dealerships treat customers rated [Mercedes-Benz](#) highest but said Detroit's brands have showed the most improvement.

Ford, Lincoln and Chevrolet scored above the average for the first time in the four years that Piped Piper Management Co. has conducted its study. Lexus was No. 2 and Mitsubishi placed last in the survey.

Pied Piper, of Monterey, Calif., sent 3,658 mystery shoppers into dealerships to develop its Prospect Satisfaction Index. The shoppers ranged from 21 to 65.

In the latest report, 25 of the 34 brands surveyed had better scores than a year earlier. Luxury brands continued to outperform mass-market brands, but BMW scored below Cadillac and Lincoln and tied with a host of other brands, including Chevrolet, Ford, Toyota and Volkswagen.

"Today's car shoppers are armed with far more vehicle and pricing information than ever before," said Pied Piper CEO Fran O'Hagan. "Successful brands and dealerships have responded by acting as helpful enablers for today's shoppers. At the most successful dealerships, the stereotype of the old-fashioned car salesperson no longer exists."

Relatively soft consumer demand for new cars, along with tougher standards from many lenders, has put more pressure on dealer personnel to sell and provide new-car financing options for many consumers.

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Relatively soft consumer demand for new cars, along with tougher standards from many lenders, has put more pressure on dealer personnel to successfully sell and provide new-car financing options for many consumers.

"Customers have come to expect the type of treatment that they get at Mercedes, BMW and Lexus in all their shopping experience," said Mark Cannon, vice president of communications at [AutoNation Inc.](#), the nation's largest holding company for new car dealers. "They want someone who is knowledgeable and can help them with the process."

When Ford launched the Taurus, AutoNation sent a sales trainer to every dealership and trained sales people on the product.

"I don't ever remember that being the priority five or 10 years ago," said Cannon.

Old stereotypes are dying, as well.

The study found that showroom visitors are likely to encounter an overbearing salesperson just 6 percent of the time. In contrast, 18 percent of the time, shoppers encountered a salesperson who was not helpful enough and did not devote enough time and attention.

In an example, Pied Piper said Ford dealership sales personnel scored better than the competition in three areas:

- More likely to discuss Ford's unique features.
- More likely to introduce themselves.
- More likely to discuss available financing options.

"Despite the widespread and continual improvement in how cars are sold, there is still plenty of room for improvement, although not necessarily in the expected areas," the study said.

About 18 percent of the time, salespeople did not pay enough attention to the shopper. Only 57 percent offered a brochure, underlining the decision "by some brands and dealerships to limit or discontinue offering brochures," the study said.

The study also found:

- 95 percent of Lexus and Porsche sales personnel reviewed a vehicle's features and controls before a test drive, compared with 74 percent at BMW.
- Land Rover, Smart and Mini salespeople rarely introduced shoppers to dealership personnel.
- Suzuki, Volkswagen, Nissan, Toyota and Infiniti dealership employees used introductions to dealership management 40 percent of the time to help clinch a deal.
- Nissan, Mazda, Infiniti, [Mercedes-Benz](#), Toyota and Volkswagen dealerships are most likely to initiate follow-up contact within 48 hours after an initial visit.
- Buick, Mitsubishi, Chevrolet and Acura dealerships were the least likely to follow up within 48 hours after a shopper's first visit.
- At BMW and Volvo stores, 80 percent of the time, personnel told shoppers about their free scheduled maintenance programs.

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