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Automotive News

Lexus, Subaru rank high for responding to internet leads

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LOS ANGELES -- Automakers whose dealers respond quickly to Internet leads with a personalized contact have tended to gain market share over those who treat those leads more casually with auto-response emails or salesman form letters.

The 2014 Pied Piper's Internet Lead Effectiveness Benchmarking Study, found that although the industry-average performance was unchanged over last year, 21 of 33 brands improved their responsiveness. But only two brands, Lexus and Subaru, have remained in the top one-third of the rankings every survey year from 2011 to 2014.

The study uses mystery shoppers to score dealerships on how responsive they are to queries made over the Internet. Among the mass-market brands, Honda, Nissan, Dodge and Ford were the top finishers, while Chevrolet had the worst finish among large brands.

Responsiveness appears to be key in maintaining strong customer relations and improved sales. Of the top 10 brands in last year's survey, eight gained share. Of the bottom 10 last year, six lost share.

"Today's most successful brands and dealerships tend to be the ones that thrive on customer Internet inquiries," said Fran O'Hagan, CEO of Pied Piper, a mystery-shopping consultant. "The days of considering the Internet as a separate piece of the car business are gone. Today, the Internet is as much a part of the car business as the showroom."

But some dealerships have yet to embrace the Internet.

No response at all

Of the 14,500 Internet leads that were submitted to dealerships, 7 percent received no response at all.

"If you imagined every 14th person walking into a showroom being ignored, that would be a problem," O'Hagan said.

Failing to respond to more than 10 percent of the leads were Chrysler, Infiniti, Kia, Mazda, Mini, Mitsubishi and Scion dealers. On the flip side, Buick, Jaguar, Land Rover, Lexus, Porsche, Smart and Subaru dealers answered 98 percent or more of their Internet leads.

Response time was key. More than half of the dealers who responded to leads took more than 30 minutes to do so, with Cadillac, Chevrolet, Mini and Mitsubishi the worst offenders.

The quality of response is important as well. Most often, a quick response comes in the form of an auto-response e-mail sent by the dealership's CRM system, or a "salesman template" form letter.

A personalized first response -- especially crucial if the email query asks a basic question like "Can I plug my iPod into the audio system?" -- happens far less frequently, just 15 percent of the time. Eventually, about 44 percent of dealerships get around to sending a personalized response, a vast improvement from 19 percent when the survey started in 2011. But only half of the queries received a personalized response within 24 hours.

Jaguar, Land Rover, Lexus, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche and VW dealerships on average answered Internet customers' specific questions more than 60 percent of the time. And Audi has gone from one of the worst at responding to questions to among the best, O'Hagan said.

Successful dealerships also follow up the email with a phone call, with an odd exception. Lexus dealerships, which scored highest in the overall survey, have one of the lowest phone-response percentages, preferring to communicate and negotiate electronically.

"The objective isn't to sell you a car," O'Hagan said. "It's to help answer questions and get you into the store."

PIED PIPER 2014 RESULTS

The top 10

Lexus
Porsche
Land Rover
Jaguar
Audi
Subaru
Fiat
Honda
Lincoln
Ram

The bottom five

Mini
Scion
Mitsubishi
Chevrolet
Infiniti

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