

Automotive News

Porsche stores repeat atop online response study

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Porsche dealerships earned the top spot in Pied Piper's annual online lead-responsiveness study for the second year in a row, despite scoring three points lower than last year. The auto industry's overall performance for effective lead response has not improved in five years.

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The auto industry's overall performance for effective lead response has not improved in five years, Pied Piper said. Industry performance dropped slightly from 2016 to 2017 with 22 of 32 brands declining.

The seventh annual Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index Internet Lead Effectiveness Benchmarking Study, conducted through secret shoppers between September 2016 and March 2017, measures the responsiveness of 18,277 dealerships across the U.S. to customer inquiries received through the stores' websites.

The study rates brands' dealerships on a 100-point scale based on timeliness of response, dealership or salesperson identification, quality of communication and forwarding of the sale.

Porsche scored a 65 in the latest study, down three points from a year earlier. BMW, with 63 points, replaced Lexus as No. 2, while Lexus fell four spots to No. 6.

Mercedes-Benz improved 8 points to 61, good for a third-place tie with Mini. The gain marked Mercedes' dealerships as most improved.

Ford and Mitsubishi were the highest-scoring nonluxury brands, finished tied with Acura for No. 8 with 57 points.

The industry average in the latest study was 54.

Every Fiat Chrysler Automobiles brand finished near or at the bottom: Fiat and Jeep tied for No. 27 with 48 points, General Motors' Buick tied with Dodge at No. 29 with 47 points, and Ram and Chrysler tied for last with 45 points.

Brand variation

Industrywide, dealerships responded to customer inquiries within 24 hours 88 percent of the time in the latest study, down from a 91 percent response rate a year ago, Pied Piper reported. And stores' staffers personally replied to inquiries within 24 hours 70 percent of the time in the latest study, down from a 74 percent rate last year.

The industry did improve in some areas. Dealerships contacted customers by phone 69 percent of the time in the latest study, up from 50 percent five years ago. Stores provided additional information about a vehicle a customer was interested in 50 percent of the time, up from 27 percent five years ago.

Pied Piper CEO Fran O'Hagan said the most interesting part of the data is still how much the brands vary in their manner of response, even among the top three.

"There's tremendous variation by brand and by dealer," O'Hagan told *Automotive News*. "It's a difficult part of the car business to do perfectly day in and day out."

Porsche dealerships, for example, responded to customers 98 percent of the time. They gave a personal response within 30 minutes 51 percent of the time but only answered customer questions 54 percent of the time and called them 56 percent of the time.

BMW and Mercedes sent a personal response within 30 minutes only about 40 percent of the time but answered questions about 70 percent of the time and called customers 70 percent of the time.

‘Whack-a-mole’

Pied Piper also found software glitches as the culprit behind some failures to respond.

One in four mystery shoppers received no response because of information technology problems, O’Hagan said. That can mean dealership responses, including automated ones, are flagged incorrectly as spam. Other times, the dealership website may hand the lead off incorrectly to the customer relationship management system.

The software glitch can be dangerous if dealerships don’t realize it’s happening, he said. Sometimes employees may never receive a customer inquiry or insist they responded to one before the store determines it has an information technology problem.

“It’s not a one-time fix,” O’Hagan said. “It’s like whack-a-mole, and dealer groups that perform and get 85 or 90 percent. Their key to success is they’re relentless. They pay attention to [lead response] and measure it.”

Regardless of information technology problems, O’Hagan noted, lack of lead response in three of four instances are still “caused by us good ol’ humans.”

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