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Infiniti tops sales-prospects survey

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Infiniti secured the top spot in a study on prospect satisfaction with dealerships for the second consecutive year.

The study, released Monday, measures how effectively each brand's dealerships sell when car shoppers visit the stores.

The 2017 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index is based on how dealerships treated mystery shoppers who visited 5,289 stores in the U.S. between July 2016 and June 2017. The study is conducted by Pied Piper Management Co.

Infiniti, with a score of 114, was followed by Lexus and Mercedes-Benz, all well ahead of all other brands. Toyota was fourth, while Honda tied with

Hyundai for fifth.

Four brands tied for seventh: Audi, Lincoln, Ram and Subaru. Tying for 11th, with an industry-average score of 104, were BMW, Chrysler, Dodge, Jaguar, Kia and Nissan.

Just as Infiniti, Lexus and Mercedes were notably better than all other brands, four were notably worse: Fiat, Volvo, Jeep and Tesla.

Last year, Lexus and Mercedes stores tied for No. 2, with Toyota next.

Inconsistent Tesla

Tesla had the most significant improvement in its score, jumping eight points from last year. But that still left it with an industry-worst score of 94.

Pied Piper said a high variability in sales-process behaviors at Tesla outlets resulted in the brand's low score.

“What we found was a tremulous variation. Maybe one time out of four, the interaction is ‘exceptional.’ But, unfortunately -- I believe it's about one-third of the time -- the Tesla dealership falls into ‘museum-curator mode,’” Pied Piper CEO Fran O’Hagan told *Automotive News*. The term “museum-curator mode,” he said, “means you’re friendly, and you answer any questions, but you just don’t do anything to sell. They don’t really do all they can do to help you become a Tesla owner.”

Neglecting to consistently ask about trade-ins, how the vehicle would be used and going through the numbers on a lease or purchase with customers kept the electric-vehicle brand at the back of the pack in prospect satisfaction. These factors differentiate a friendly salesperson from a helpful one, which O’Hagan said makes all the difference.

Put another way, about one in four Tesla store visits earned an “A,” but one in three earned a “D” or “F,” Pied Piper said in a release. In contrast, visits to the industry-leading Infiniti, Lexus and Mercedes-Benz stores earned an “A” about half the time, while less than 15 percent of them earned a “D” or “F.”

Building rapport

As an example of how sales staffers’ performance varies among brands, Pied Piper noted that some brands’ salespeople try to build rapport with a customer who walks in the door, rather than just saying, “Can I help you?”

Lincoln, Hyundai, Infiniti, Lexus and Smart salespeople tried to build rapport about 60 percent of the time, the study found. In contrast, salespeople at Porsche, Jeep, Fiat, Volvo and Ford stores only tried to build rapport about 35 percent of the time.

Or consider the question of whether the shopper has a trade-in vehicle. A trade-in can change the terms of a deal, perhaps even becoming an obstacle to a purchase. The study found salespeople asked about a trade-in about 90 percent of the time at GMC, Nissan, Chevrolet, Dodge and Chrysler dealerships, but only about 55 percent of the time at Tesla, Porsche, Lincoln, Mini and Smart dealerships.

O’Hagan said since the study began in 2007, the Internet has changed the game for customers seeking dealership assistance. Because nine of 10 car shoppers gather information online before they walk in the door, salespeople have fewer opportunities to sway consumers.

“You’re seeing the customer [when he or she is] all the way down the purchase funnel, in many instances,” O’Hagan said. “The salespeople have to act as if this customer is the most important person to walk in the door because in this case they are. They’re ready to buy.”

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