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Mercedes-Benz stores take first in online response study

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Mercedes-Benz dealerships took the No. 1 slot in an online lead-responsiveness study, displacing two-time consecutive champ Porsche, Pied Piper Management Co. said Monday.

The eighth annual Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index Internet Lead Effectiveness Benchmarking Study, conducted through secret shoppers between

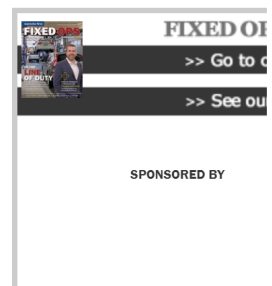
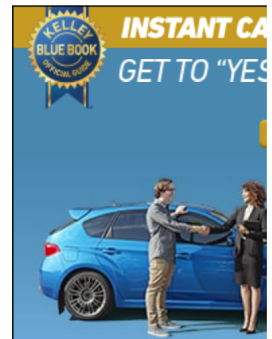
April 2017 and March, measures the response time and quality of 17,391 U.S. dealerships to customer queries received through the stores' websites.

The auto industry's overall performance for effective lead response improved from last year, Pied Piper said, though one in four customers still failed to receive a personal response within 24 hours. Moreover, wide disparities persist amid the overall improvement.

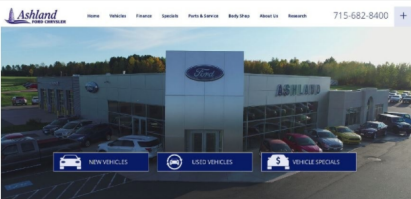
Dealership ratings, scored on a 100-point scale, consider timeliness of the responses, whether the dealerships or salespeople identify themselves in the responses and the quality of the interaction in communication style and forwarding the sale.

Industry, brand gains

Industrywide, 20 percent of dealerships scored above 80 points, and 42 percent scored between 60 and 79. Thirteen percent of stores scored between 40 and 59 points, and 25 percent scored below 40. The industry average was 57, up three points from a year earlier, while 24 of 33 brands increased their scores.



Dealership groups that consistently score more than 80 points, the study finds, tend to close more than twice as many transactions with customers than those whose scores lag below 40.



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Mercedes-Benz earned 67 points in the latest study, up six from last year. Porsche's score of 65 points was unchanged from last year. Lexus shot up five points to 64 points to stay in third place.

Fiat Chrysler Automobiles' Chrysler, Ram and Dodge brands improved significantly from the previous year, as did Mercedes-Benz, Honda and Buick. Chrysler was the most-improved, up eight points, but it, Dodge, Ram and Jeep still were below the industry average.

Scores for Mini, BMW, Infiniti, Chevrolet and GMC dropped from year-earlier levels.


Low bar

Pied Piper CEO Fran O'Hagan said the more than 20 mystery shoppers search for assistance the way any customer would, by selecting a dealership and following the instructions provided on the site. Most of the time they are less than impressed.

"Some of the things we see may be humorous if they weren't a bit sad," O'Hagan told *Automotive News*. The bar is low, he added, considering responses are measured using 19 criteria -- a thorough examination of what could be a text message or a brief email.

Mystery shoppers pay particular attention to whether a dealership's autoresponder is set up correctly, if a personalized, human response is issued to the customer within an hour and if a phone call is placed after an automated message.

If a dealership gets even three of the 19 criteria right, O'Hagan said, it will outperform three-fourths of the competition.



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"The IT part of this fails surprisingly often, and one example of that is when dealers send out emails to customers today," he said. "One in six of those goes into the customer's spam folder."

'Relentless'

Mercedes-Benz took the top prize this year, O'Hagan said, because the dealers made a point to educate themselves on what the problems are with systems software and how to fix them.

"They're relentless," he said. "All the way up and down their organization, how dealers handle Web response is one of the top items they pay attention to."