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Audi tops study of sales-prospect satisfaction

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Audi, for the first time, landed atop an annual dealership study that evaluates brands based on how effective salespeople are at handling consumers and closing deals.

The 2018 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index measures how mystery car shoppers sent to 3,466 dealerships in the U.S. were treated and later surveyed by consultant Pied Piper of Monterey, Calif. The latest study was conducted from July 2017 to June 2018.

Audi, whose score rose eight points, was also the most improved brand -- it rose to first place from last year's seventh-place showing. Lexus placed second, followed by Toyota and Mercedes-Benz. Last year's front runner, Infiniti, tied with Ram for fifth. Buick, Jaguar, Land Rover and Nissan tied for sixth.

They were followed by six brands that tied: Acura, BMW, Cadillac, Kia, Lincoln and Mini.



Infiniti suffered the steepest drop, decreasing seven points from the 2017 study. Still, Infiniti, along with Audi, Lexus, Mercedes-Benz and Toyota, all scored ahead of the industry average for the past three years.

Tesla, Genesis, Porsche, Alfa Romeo and Fiat rounded out the bottom five.

The behavior of salespeople varied widely from brand to brand and from dealership to dealership. For instance, salespeople from Tesla, Mini, Infiniti and Land Rover dealerships were more likely to ask customers if they had already visited the store's website, than those at Kia, Volkswagen, Ram and Genesis dealerships.



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Salespeople at Chevrolet, Chrysler and Nissan dealerships were more likely to suggest writing up a deal, according to the study, while salespeople at Tesla, Mitsubishi, Land Rover, Volkswagen and Genesis dealerships made the suggestion less than 67 percent of the time.

Audi soars

Customers today can obtain as much information, and in some cases, more than a salesperson from consumer shopping guides and company websites, Pied Piper CEO Fran O'Hagan told *Automotive News*, and as a result, the only remaining role for the salesperson is to be "attentive and helpful" and turn a car shopper into a car buyer.

"They just want the vehicle that's good for them, on the terms that are good for them," O'Hagan said. "So those are the parts of the business that Audi salespeople actually did very well in."

Just under half of Audi dealerships scored an "A" in the study, O'Hagan said, and Audi salespeople were more likely to "fact find" to figure out who will operate the vehicle, and the overall needs of the customer.

"There's a big difference between a customer who thinks, 'Yeah maybe I'll consider an Audi,' and another customer who comes in saying, 'I want the blue A4 with the premium package -- I know you have it in inventory,'" he said.

Audi salespeople were also more likely to offer demonstrations to showcase vehicle features, and to disclose compelling equipment that differentiate a vehicle from competitors.



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'The Wild West'

For the fifth consecutive year, Tesla had the lowest score in the study, falling 5 points from 2017.

"We found that it was the Wild West," Fran said of the Tesla retail experience. "The sales behaviors were all over the map and that has not changed in five years."

Similar to recent surveys, the 2018 study found that one in four times a Tesla store would receive an "A"; 40 percent of the time the store would receive a "D" or an "F."

"At some point in the future there will be a meeting at Tesla headquarters ... and the discussion will be 'Why does this Tesla dealership sell so many cars compared to this other one?' when demand is not greater than supply anymore," O'Hagan said. "And then maybe they'll start to get interested in the specific behaviors their salespeople are using with the customers."