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BREAKING NEWS

Study Gauges Retail Experience for 'A' Brands

RV Business
Monday, June 2, 2008

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is an annual report from Pied Piper Management Co. LLC, a Pacific Grove, Calif.-based program development and management consulting company, gauging the retail experience by brand for consumers shopping Class A motorhomes. The 2008 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index was conducted between June 2007 and April 2008 using anonymous shopper evaluations at 583 dealerships located throughout the U.S., representing approximately one in three of all U.S. Class A RV dealership locations.

Winnebago's Itasca brand RV dealerships ranked highest in the newly released 2008 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index U.S. RV Industry Class A Study, one of a series of annual national benchmarking studies which measure how consumers are treated when shopping for a new car, motorcycle, RV or boat.

Following Itasca in the rankings were Damon, Monaco, Holiday Rambler and Beaver. Rounding out the Top 10 were Alfa Leisure, Tiffin, American Coach, Safari and Mandalay.

The 2008 study reports that overall RV industry sales effectiveness was unchanged compared to the previous year, but performance of the 22 individual brands varied, with nine brands improving their performance, five unchanged and eight declining. Brands showing significant improvement included Beaver, Tiffin and American Coach. Brands with substantial declines included Sportscoach, Monaco and Fleetwood.

"Challenging consumer confidence, higher fuel prices and less availability of home equity financing have created a tough environment for RV manufacturers and dealers," said Fran O'Hagan, president of Pied Piper. "But we see examples of brands and dealers who make the most of the floor traffic they already have."

According to the study, Itasca salespeople led the salespeople from all other brands for mentioning the availability of different financing options, for product knowledge and for handling any required wait professionally. Damon salespeople led all brands for giving compelling reasons to buy now, for carrying out walk-around product presentations and for tying product features to benefits relevant to the prospects.

The Monaco brand was ranked first last year, and despite falling to third in this year's rankings, Monaco brand salespeople still led all other salespeople for offering a test drive, for offering a business card and for overcoming any objections.

The study measured 50-plus aspects of the RV sales process, and reported industrywide change for some of sales process factors. This year RV salespeople were more likely to set a future appointment or encourage shoppers to return to the dealership, were more likely to ask for contact information and also more likely to ask what attracted the shopper to their desired brand.

However, RV salespeople were less likely to mention the availability of different financing options, less likely to mention product features unique from competitive brands and less likely to offer a test drive.

Pied Piper said that unique among U.S. motor vehicle industries is the fact that most RV dealerships carry multiple RV brands, often with more focus on product offerings than on the brands themselves. As a result, shoppers asking for a specific, well-known brand of RV are often encouraged instead to follow more of a commodity approach and consider a product favored by the dealership. The 2008 study showed that RV salespeople try to 'flip' one shopper out of five from the brand they requested to an alternative product suggested by the dealership.

"The most successful RV manufacturers have figured out ways of building the value of their brands for their dealers and customers instead of allowing their products to be sold strictly as a commodity," said O'Hagan.

Some RV brands fare better than others: Winnebago is loyally promoted by their dealers 92% of the time, compared to American Coach or Georgie Boy, for which dealers promote competitor products more than half the time.

The 2008 study marked the first time that PPMC measured not only a shopper's experience at the dealership, but also a shopper's experience contacting the dealership separately by telephone and by Internet or email. Despite the knowledge that a majority of RV shoppers now claim to research their purchase on-line, dealerships were often slow to respond to on-line shopper inquiries.

When dealerships were contacted by Internet or email, 70% of the dealers from across all brands failed to respond in any way within 24 hours. Of those who did respond by email, only 37% offered reasons to buy from their dealership, but 86% did encourage the on-line shopper to visit their dealership.

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