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Call center dials up the top ranking for Group 1

Group 1 scored highest in a survey of the top 17 dealership groups on how well they answered service calls and booked appointments.

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Jones: Service advisers too busy

When a customer calls to make a service appointment at a [Group 1 Automotive](#) dealership, there's a roughly 95 percent chance their call will be answered within 20 seconds and only a 2 percent chance the call will go unanswered.

Stats like that explain why the nearly 150 participating Group 1 stores ranked first in handling service appointment calls in a study by Pied Piper Management Co. from January to May. The study relied on "mystery shoppers" who posed as customers while calling 1,739 stores owned by 17 of the largest dealership groups in the U.S. to schedule service appointments.



The secret sauce for Group 1's success? A [dedicated call center](#) in Houston that employs 160 phone agents. They typically handle 130,000 to 150,000 calls a month,

said Mike Jones, senior vice president of aftersales.

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At Group 1's call center, the goal is for agents to keep calls under four minutes and answer customers' key questions.

Group 1 created the phone center in 2011. At that time, service advisers answered the phones. But because advisers are so busy, about 30 percent of calls weren't answered, he told *Automotive News*.

"Answering 70 percent of your calls actually isn't bad," he said. "But it's also unacceptable when 30 percent of calls go unanswered. So we created a call center in a standalone building."

(Many employees now work either remotely or split their time between that and working in the call center.)

The call center started as a pilot program, with about 10 agents handling calls for three

small call volume stores, said Mike Chan, director of sales and service support for Group 1.

"That helped us gauge what we needed to scale up," he said.

When customers **call for service** at any Group 1 dealership, it goes to the call center, where phone agents know which dealership the customer is trying to reach and answer accordingly.

"To the customer, it's completely seamless," Jones said. "It's like they're calling the actual store."

The goal is for agents to keep calls under four minutes; the average time is slightly less than that, he said.

Service advisers rarely take calls, Jones said, because it's not a good business practice to have them leave a face-to-face conversation with a customer just to take a phone call.

"They already have a big job, so we took inbound calls off their plates," he said.

Agents are equipped to answer the four questions customers ask most often:

1. What kind of service or repair does their car need?
2. How much will it cost?
3. How long will it take?
4. How soon is an appointment available?

"The dealerships that can best answer those four questions get the business," Jones said.

The phone agents' efficiency **enhances customer retention efforts**, he said, noting the group's overall service retention rate is nearly 69 percent.

"That's really good," Jones said.

Three major factors drive that success: thorough analysis of call data; thorough vetting of job candidates during interviews; and comprehensive training. Interviewers look for people with great communication skills and what Chan called "a good phone presence,"

which includes things such as good voice quality and the ability to speak clearly.

A staff of 10 handles training. During a two-week session, new hires learn the phone processes and protocols, then gradually start handling a small volume of phone calls; most employees are ready to handle a full volume of calls after 20 days, he said.

Consistent adherence to processes is critical so all customers receive the same experience, Chan said.

The auto group also boasts an 80 percent show rate for service appointments. Jones credits that to a dealership's ability to accommodate appointment days and times that fit customers' schedules.

"We've had to hire more technicians because the call center does such a great job of scheduling appointments," he said. "We can get customers' cars in on the same day they call about 80 percent of the time, and the rest usually can get in the next day."

While developing a call center was a major undertaking, achieving success boils down to a simple philosophy: Don't leave customers hanging.

"Answering phone calls at a dealership is very, very important," Jones emphasized. "Everything starts by simply answering the phone."