

information technology

Better info speeds car shopping journey

Study: Consumers spend less time in dealerships

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As consumers compress their car-shopping journeys, they are spending less time in showrooms.

A new study commissioned by vehicle shopping site AutoTrader.com finds that new-car shoppers today take 13.75 hours on average to buy a vehicle from start to finish vs. 19 hours in 2011.

For dealers, that decrease means that shoppers are finding more information online — and spending less time at dealerships.

Dealers and carmakers are putting better

information online and in showrooms, allowing shoppers to find what they need to make buying decisions faster, said Kevin Filan, vice president of customer marketing and industry relations at AutoTrader Group, the parent company of AutoTrader.com.

Improved consumer confidence also may be prompting buyers to pull the trigger faster than they did two years ago, he said.

The amount of time shoppers spent researching vehicles and dealers on the Internet fell slightly.

The biggest change was in face time at dealerships and in other offline research, such as talking with friends and family, Filan said.

Faster shopping

In hours	2011	2013
NEW-VEHICLE SHOPPING TIME		
Online	11.5	10
Visiting dealers, other offline	7.5	3.75
Total	19	13.75
USED-VEHICLE SHOPPING TIME		
Online	11	11.75
Visiting dealers, other offline	7	3.5
Total	18	15.25

Source: AutoTrader.com study by R.L. Polk

Shoppers cut time offline in half from 7.5 hours in 2011 to 3.75 hours in 2013.

In an earlier report, AutoTrader.com said that 58 percent of car buyers visited only one

or two dealerships before making a vehicle purchase. The average number of dealership visits before purchase has been falling for years.

Used-vehicle buyers also are spending a growing portion of their shopping time online, Filan said.

He said dealerships are aiding online used-car shoppers with more photos and videos than in the past to help them verify the condition of vehicles.

AutoTrader.com's 2013 Automotive Buyer Influence Study was conducted by R.L. Polk & Co., which surveyed 2,739 random vehicle buyers by phone and online. About 90 percent of those buyers had purchased a vehicle within the past six months. **AN**

Ditch the pitch to make a social media plan click

Experts: Dealerships should build customer ties

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More dealerships have jumped into social media in recent years, hoping to use Facebook, Twitter and other sites as tools to move products.

But auto retailers who bombard social media audiences with inventory photos and sales pitches are missing the chance to engage customers and build loyalty, experts say.

The key to a successful social media strategy, they say, is building one-on-one, real-world connections with fans and followers by talking to them, not *at* them.

"More people are starting to understand social media isn't about blasting my inventory on there saying, 'Buy, buy, buy.' It's more about a relationship," says Paul Potratz, COO of Potratz Partners Advertising, a digital auto advertising agency in Schenectady, N.Y.

"There are a lot of people who go to Facebook or Twitter to ask a question. Instead of the phone or e-mail, that's their new communication platform."

Some dealerships are engaging their audiences online by giving away tickets to sporting events, offering coupons for free oil changes, creating instructional videos with professional production crews and simply helping customers solve problems.

Tweet power

There's value in just one tweet.

Ryan Holtz, marketing manager of Zender Ford in Spruce Grove, Alberta, was perusing the dealership's Twitter feed recently when he spotted a tweet from a customer at the store for vehicle service.

Always on the lookout for ways to connect with customers, Holtz went to the lounge to introduce himself — demonstrating how dealerships can leverage social media to build relationships.

Holtz learned that the customer's iPhone was low on power, so he gave him a charger to use. Then Holtz gave him a lunch from the dealership's cafeteria.

To top things off, Holtz led the customer on an impromptu tour of the building, which

Expert advice

Stacey Fowler of digital media agency Sonic Boom offers social media tips. For a Q&A with Fowler, go to autonews.com/fowler.



- Provide something valuable, such as education, that people can't get elsewhere.
- When posting or planning promotions, always ask: What will get people talking?
- Use online tools such as TweetDeck or HootSuite to monitor Twitter and find ways to join conversations. Answering a question can lead to a sale.

was undergoing renovations at the time.

Before the customer left, Holtz recalled him saying, "Wow, just from a tweet, I got treated like a king."

Holtz, who described himself as a one-man marketing department, has worked at Zender Ford since December.

When he arrived, Zender's Twitter account had only four followers and the store's Facebook page had just 57 fans.

Holtz says dealerships should look at social media as a way to give people glimpses inside their stores. Holtz routinely shares Vine videos — up to six-second clips filmed on smartphones — that document day-to-day life at Zender Ford on Twitter.

And when he posts inventory photos, they are often accompanied by witty messages that don't mention prices.

Zender Ford's Twitter following has grown to more than 1,700 and its Facebook fan count is approaching 3,000.

"The biggest thing about social media and online is I'm always looking for ways to take that community offline," Holtz says. "How can I actually physically talk to these people that are online, offline? Whatever chance we get to do that, we'll do it."

Holtz remembers turning an offended



Dealership marketing manager Ryan Holtz: Social media can give consumers glimpses of day-to-day life inside dealerships.

couple into buyers within a two-hour span, thanks to the power of Facebook.

Holtz says the husband had posted a complaint on Zender Ford's Facebook page claiming that his wife was treated poorly during a visit to the store. The wife said salespeople didn't acknowledge her because she didn't appear wealthy.

Holtz responded, sending her a link to the staff page to see if she remembered the employees. Holtz learned from the couple that the incident had happened two years earlier and involved staff members who no longer worked there.

Shortly after the exchange, the wife came in for a test drive and ended up buying a vehicle.

"We keep all posts on our Facebook. We don't delete any negative posts," Holtz says. "It gives us a chance, every negative post, to make it right."

In another instance, Zender used YouTube to help customers who were having problems using the MyFord Touch infotainment system. The dealership created several instructional videos to highlight the system's features.

Holtz says educational videos get the most attention.

"YouTube is the golden child," he says.

"That's a really good way to get our message out there."

Embracing social media was an easy choice for Del Grande Dealer Group in California's Silicon Valley, the backyard of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Del Grande ranks No. 56 on the *Automotive News* list of the top 125 dealership groups in the United States with retail sales of 12,408 new vehicles in 2012.

Fan pages

About three years ago, Del Grande, which has 11 dealerships in San Jose, Newark and Sunnyvale, hired a full-time social media director to shape strategy.

The group also has enlisted three videographers to take full advantage of YouTube.

Last year, the group's stores had 1.1 million YouTube views on videos ranging from customer testimonials to vehicle walk-arounds. Del Grande stores have more than 1,250 videos available for viewing.

On Facebook, in addition to having fan pages for its stores, Del Grande Dealer Group encourages its salespeople to start their own pages, says Shaun Del Grande, president of the group.