

Studies: Luxury car shoppers on Web want instant info

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Luxury auto dealerships are misreading the market if they design Web sites primarily to attract customers to the showroom, new studies suggest.

What luxury customers want instead, researchers say: hard, immediate information.

The Titan Agency, an advertising agency in Atlanta, recently surveyed more than 50 luxury brand dealers in Southern states. Nearly all agreed that the purpose of a dealership Web site is to generate sales and schedule appointments with salespeople, the study found.

But that's not what luxury buyers told J.D. Power and Associates they want from the Web, said Arianne Walker, Power's director of marketing and media research.

Great debate

What should a luxury dealership's Web site emphasize?

Market researchers say: Specific, immediate vehicle information; third-party testimonials

Many dealers say: Attracting customers to showroom, scheduling sales appointments

Consumers: Ditch the pitch

"Customers want information," Walker told *Automotive News*. "When consumers reach the dealer site, they want to know specifically whether the dealership has a specific model in inventory. They don't want to be told they have to come in and shop."

Tom Berry, automotive group director at the Titan Agency, says he thinks Power's findings may be lost on some luxury retailers.

"Consumers are saying clearly that they don't want to be solicited online," Berry says. "They're coming to dealer Web sites looking for specific information, and they're doing it because they want to control how and when they shop."

Berry says dealers are missing an opportunity to market to premium consumers who seek referrals and third-party recommendations to make purchase decisions. Of the dealers Titan surveyed, 40 percent dismissed as "useless" online social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

"Social networking is very important among luxury buyers," Berry says. "They want a relationship with the dealer. They are looking for reputation and testimonials from other customers — exactly the sort of thing you'd get through social networking."

Luxury shoppers often begin doing online research months in advance of a vehicle purchase, Berry says. By the time they contact a dealer, he says, they are well past the point of being solicited to come to the dealership to learn about the vehicle.

Online pampering

"These buyers are looking for a nonthreatening Internet relationship with a dealer," Berry says, "not someone asking them for personal information."

Megadealer Robert Rosenthal, whose Rosenthal Automotive Organization in suburban Washington owns Jaguar and other luxury dealerships, counters that good salespeople trump a good Web site.

"You do have to provide a lot of specific vehicle details on your site," Rosenthal says. "But what really makes the site work is a talented Web sales manager. You want to get the customer on the phone."

Berry says the next opportunity for luxury dealerships may be to bring to the Web their ability to pamper customers. JM Lexus, the nation's largest Lexus dealership, is addressing that issue.

In January, the Margate, Fla., dealership launched an Internet service called Ready Upon Arrival. For \$249, a JM customer can get purchase forms and contract documents online, without setting foot in the dealership's finance and insurance office.

The service gives customers the added luxury of quick vehicle delivery, says Jim Dunn, general manager of JM Lexus.

Forms that are normally filled out in the finance and insurance office can be e-mailed to the dealership, he says. When a customer arrives to pick up the vehicle, Dunn says, he or she signs the contract, gets a walk-around and can drive away.

Says Dunn: "Our customers value their time. That's one reason they shop online. They're looking for information — very detailed information — and service. Our mission is to give them everything they want on our Web site."

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