Is Your Phone Process Making You Money or Costing You Deals?

How Phone Training Can Equal Big Improvements in Sales and Service

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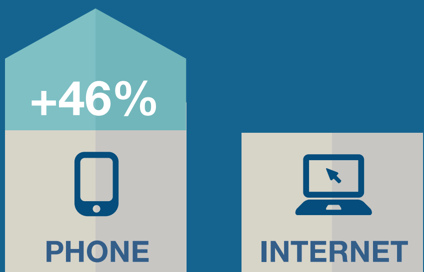

Over the past two years, phone leads have grown 46 percent vs. Internet leads[1]. The reason… click-to-call. A majority of car buyers carry a smartphone. This makes it more convenient to use a click-to-call phone link on a dealership website or ad than filling out a lead form or sending an email.

That phone call is the very first interaction between the customer and a dealership employee. The magnitude of that moment cannot be overstated. It's your one and only chance to make a good impression on a potential customer.

Is your dealership prepared to handle this influx of calls?

Where It Starts to Go Wrong

Sadly many dealerships don't handle this moment well, especially in cases where the customer reaches out to the dealership first.

Just look at the phone-up process many dealerships still have in place.

When I visit dealerships where inbound calls are open to the floor, it's almost always the newer sales consultants who are the most eager to take the calls.

That means the least experienced (and least capable) sales consultants are often the ones representing the dealership to potential customers at the most critical moment of the sales process.

This is night and day from the rigorous precaution we take with new salespeople in other contexts.

For example, when I was a rookie salesperson, it was months before I was allowed to take a showroom up on my own. To start, I was paired with an experienced salesperson and only allowed to observe as he worked his deals. In time, I was eventually allowed to work a few of my own customers, but even then, my work was under very close supervision.

If we're that careful with new sales consultants in the showroom, why wouldn't we be equally as careful with them on the phone? Unlike the showroom, where you can intervene if needed, you can't do a thing to stop an inexperienced salesperson from dismissing a potential customer on an inbound phone call.

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Two Phone Up Processes that Work

For dealerships without a dedicated BDC, I've found there are two straightforward phone processes that can effectively ensure phone ups are handled properly. In both cases, you'll start by having all inbound sales calls routed to a single location like a receptionist. At that point you have two options:

1. The receptionist round robins the calls to the more experienced or specially-trained sales consultants.
2. The receptionist pages for "Sales," and the sales consultants call in if they're available. The receptionist can then send the up to the most experienced salesperson available at the time.

In both scenarios, your receptionist can then log the call and who it went to. This will:

- Limit your inbound phone leads to a select group of your best salespeople.
- Ensure a consistent log of who took what call and when, allowing you to follow up with the rep later if needed.

Another way to ensure proper handling of these calls is with the right phone system. Many phone systems are simply a phone that rings and an employee that answers it. However, an integrated phone system provides detailed information about the caller, helping the salesperson conduct a professional and timely call.

For example, a call comes in from someone who's bought or serviced at your dealership before. The receptionist, or BDC person, would be able to identify this immediately and route the call to their previous sales consultant. This type of investment not only improves your phone process, it also improves your customer's experience.

The Next Step… Train 'Em Up

Once you've decided on your call routing process, or possibly even to implement a new phone system, you need to make sure you provide effective training to the people taking those calls and using the system.

Most dealerships have at least one or two people that are all-stars on the phone. If you have one of these people, ask if they'll help design some training for the rest of your staff.

A helpful first step is to record your all-star at work on the phone. If you're using Callbright or Reynolds Integrated Telephone System, this happens automatically.

All you have to do is play the recording back for the rest of your staff, and then ask them to break down how it went. Sometimes just hearing how an experienced salesperson handles a call can do wonders for a trainee's effectiveness.

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Training for the Sales Staff

To really ensure your call takers get the best training, you should also consider bringing in an expert to help.

Make sure the trainers you bring in have actually worked in the automotive industry. Our industry is unique, and it pays to have trainers who know the ins and outs of selling in a dealership setting.

Whether you use internal staff or bring in someone to help, the key is to train your salespeople to maintain control of their conversations. Here are four tasks your training should focus on:

1. **Use Closed-ended Questions:**
   Make sure your standard word tracks avoid open-ended questions. Your salespeople need to control the flow and direction of their conversations, and the best way to do that is to ask closed-ended questions.
2. **Set an Appointment With Multiple Choice Questions:**
   To get a customer to commit to an appointment, give them simple multiple choice questions. Offer two possible appointment days and then suggest two different times for the customer to choose from.
3. **Preview the Sales Process:**
   Remove as much of the anxiety involved with the purchase decision as possible. Inform the prospect what the sales process will look like when they get to the showroom, who they'll talk to, and what to expect along the way.

Pro-Tip: **Make appointment times on the quarter-hour (2:15 or 2:45 p.m. instead of 2:00 or 2:30 p.m.). People remember quarter-hour slots better and are more likely to show up because of it.**

...make a potential customer as comfortable as possible, even before they step foot in your store.

...you'll cut down on no-shows, increase efficiency, and boost your bottom line.

4. **Get Them to Show:**
   Have a simple checklist of things your salespeople always tells a prospect while they are still on the phone. These are things like: directions to the dealership, where to park, where to go when they arrive, and who to speak with. The key is to make a potential customer as comfortable as possible, even before they step foot in your store.

Throughout the training process, the trainer should include extensive role play to make sure the staff is comfortable with the process and the talk tracks. Once the process is turned over to those taking the calls, the trainer should observe and coach them on how to improve.

Finally, make sure *ongoing training* is in place so that new employees don't miss out on the same essential training.

Don't forget about the Service drive...

Let's turn our attention to the Service drive, where it's just as important to have employees who are well-trained on phone skills.

Most service writers handle dozens of calls every day, about all sorts of issues. Customers might call to set an appointment, check on the status of a vehicle, check the price of a potential service, or just ask a general question about the kinds of vehicles you service.

At a minimum, your training program should ensure your employees know how to clearly communicate appointment dates and times, what customers need to do before the appointment, who they will see, when to bring in their vehicle, and how long a visit should take. Get this right consistently, and you'll cut down on no-shows, increase the efficiency of your shop, and boost your bottom line in the process.

Your service writers also need to master uncovering as much information as they can while they're on the phone with the customer. If you can get a good description of the problem and what the customer wants, that'll save you time in the RO process when they show for their appointment. Get that right and the customer will feel important because the advisor will be waiting on them with everything ready. The increased trust will help your service advisors book more hours per RO at better grosses. It also makes any outbound calls more effective.

Outbound Service Calls

Speaking of outbound calls, service advisors also spend a lot of their time calling customers who have vehicles in the shop. Usually this is a request for authorization to perform service along with an upsell attempt for additional service.

Your call training should cover the basics, including asking for permission to continue the call, identifying yourself, and stating the purpose of the call. But the real return on investment comes when you teach your advisors how to improve their upselling skills. Advisors who are good at upselling will often double or triple a few ROs a day, and that adds up to a lot of additional revenue over the long term.

Bottom Line

You need to invest in selecting the right individuals to handle your calls, train them well, and implement a process for logging all your calls with as much information as possible. You might even consider upgrading your phone system to help you do this more effectively. After all, the phone call is usually the customer's first real experience with your sales staff, and you want to make the right impression.

Phone training can mean big improvements in both your Sales and Service departments. Do it in-house or hire an expert consultant, but just do it!

Visit ***reyrey.com/whitepapers*** to read more about changes and new opportunities in the automotive industry.

Acknowledgements:
[1] "Dealers' Phones Ring Again," Barkholz, David, Automotive News, July 21, 2014.

Alex Abramovich produced tremendous results in his 10 years serving the automotive retail industry as Sales Manager, Finance Manager, and General Manager at various dealerships. He brought those skills to the Reynolds Consulting Services group in 2012, where he has excelled into a lead consultant. He is qualified to consult on CRM Process Improvements and Retail Sales Operations.

Retail Management System

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