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How Dealers Can Deal with Online



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Jumpstart Automotive Media's CEO outlines an option to help dealerships keep up with the changing face of new-media marketing while remaining focused on their core business.

As the auto market continues to slump, it has never been more imperative for dealers to find and influence as many in-market car buyers as possible. At the same time, the audience of in-market buyers has become a moving target, far more complex to hit than at any time in history.

For decades dealers could put marketing on autopilot since their primary new lead generation was through display ads in the local newspaper. As a dealer, I could add color, punch up some splashy call outs or grab attention with 48-point type announcing sales events. And things worked. But now, most customers are online, and the dealer's marketing mix requires a skill set that they may not have.

Today's dealers are really good at selling cars off the showroom floor, and are adept at customer care and service; yet, these same experienced professionals may get a little intimidated by the new marketing regime: things like search engine marketing, search engine optimization or advertising on auto sites to local in-market shoppers (which pages? what kind of ad units? is rich media better? can I afford video? how do I design the best ad and know where to run it to get the best results?). And while they know when their newspaper ads runs (they can see it appear, right there in print), they may not have a solid grasp on when and where their online ads ran, or if they were even effective?

Even dealers who are completely enthusiastic about the value of online may be intimidated by all the questions this disconnect raises: is there a better way to design ads to lift conversion rates? What should my website look like and what functions should be included in order to pull folks into my showroom? What is "sequential messaging" and how can I make it work for me? And all of these questions are just about online. Now that mobile advertising has begun, the level of complexity (and possible costs) has increased exponentially.

As someone who deals with these kinds of issues every day I can be sympathetic to the marketing challenges facing dealers. No one likes change. It was an easier world when your biggest media decision was where and when to play golf with the newspaper or local TV rep. Even now, more than a decade into widespread adoption of the internet, there are those who want to pretend that it was not a major paradigm shift in media consumption or that it hasn't has a disruptive effect on the way people buy high ticket items, like cars and vacations. But the plain fact is that people increasingly turn *first* to the internet to research their major purchases, if only to do some price comparisons. What retailer hasn't seen customers walk through his or her doors armed with printouts from websites?

Dealers have a couple of options. They can try to develop an internal core competency in web marketing. It will be expensive, and will require constant retraining, as the web continues to evolve at lightning speed and new platforms emerge with opportunities to pull buyers into showrooms. They can outsource various specialty tasks (such as search marketing or online video production) to a variety of local agencies and then try to tie all of their efforts into a cohesive plan.

Or, they can engage firms that do nothing but obsess over these things. Firms with broad internet insight and expertise and that work with lots of dealers can apply those learnings to your business. It's a strategy that lets dealers stop worrying about how online works and focus on what they do best: deliver great service to their customers.

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