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Why do car buyers prefer one Web site over others?

It's a fact that even though less than 5 percent of today's car shoppers are interested in actually buying a vehicle online, they are using the Internet to decide what they want to buy and from whom, says the CEO of HLF Brandtailers, an auto industry marketing company.

Recent polls show that over 90 percent of today's car buyers are referring to the Internet during their vehicle shopping process. So what's going to get these prospects to a dealership's Web site ahead of every other dealer's? How can a dealership make their link the first choice when it's time to dealer shop? The answer may come as a bit of a surprise.

"Contrary to what today's huge number of Internet marketing sales reps may be trying to sell you, most car shoppers do not respond to Search Engine Marketing (SEM) when determining who they're going to shop," said Cheril Hendry, CEO of HLF Brandtailers, a full-service marketing, advertising and idea development agency specializing in the automotive industry.

"On the contrary, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) plays a significant part in the process, but the biggest factor in online dealership link selection is the brand. And that's not the Toyota versus Ford brand, it's the dealership's brand."

Not surprisingly, the reason can be found in the online behavior of most car shoppers; behavior that, thanks to the ability to measure hits, clicks and links, can be easily quantified. Such web site traffic tracking capabilities can reveal, for example, that over 80% of consumers start their car shopping process via a search engine and most often that search engine is Google. It can also reveal what most shoppers will do next.

According to Hendry, once shoppers have accessed Google, they then type in a manufacturer's name and click on the most relevant search engine result, which 99 percent of the time takes them to the OEM site. They spend 20 to 30 minutes at the OEM site, most often configuring their ideal vehicle. Then, with model style, MSRP, and options determined, they look for the dealer that has their dream car.

They type in their zip or city in the "Locate a Dealer" section of the OEM site and a page opens with a selection of dealership links, anywhere from a few names to several pages. It's usually organized by geographic distance from the zip or city they input, but it usually offers the consumer more than one convenient choice.

Recognizing that this is the moment of opportunity to win the shopper over by getting them to a dealership's Web site first, what's going to make them click on that link?

“Car shoppers say it’s the brand,” said Hendry. “It’s the promising thoughts that come to mind when they see your dealership name. It’s the higher caliber of positive recognition that puts you first on their shopping list. Brand recognition is what makes them click and sends them to your homepage.”

Hendry says that it sounds so simple that sometimes it’s easy to miss. She adds that the best way to make sure a dealership doesn’t miss out on opportunities to capture interested shoppers is to develop and promote a brand that leaves the competition in the dust.

“Developing and promoting a brand is an involved process that does take time and effort,” she said, “but it more than pays for itself in the long run in terms of differentiating your dealership from the competition and developing loyal, lifelong customers.”

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