



Making the Automotive Services Experience Exceptional

Think Like the Customer



Sales Sells the First Vehicle

Buying a new car or truck is truly a memorable and exciting event—in fact, for some of your customers, it borders on the magical. It's that euphoric feeling of owning something brand new, and of course, the pride and satisfaction of pulling into the driveway with a new set of wheels. And, don't forget that new car smell.

Dealerships sell thousands of vehicles every year and often forget just how special a new car purchase is to a single buyer. They

shouldn't. If the purchase process was stellar, your dealership has its newest promoter. Unfortunately, this buyer bliss, at best, only happens about every three to five years, which certainly adds to the elation of the initial purchase. However, it begs the question, how do dealers maintain a buyer's enthusiasm, and ultimately, loyalty between purchases?

In most instances, it comes down to service.

Service Sells the Rest

Servicing a vehicle is viewed much differently than a purchase. While hardly capable of generating that euphoric feeling of buying a new vehicle, the service experience shouldn't equate to a trip to the dentist. It's often seen as a negative of car ownership—an ongoing expense that owners feel simply maintains their vehicle without adding other tangible benefits. Which means, the importance of making the service experience exceptional cannot be understated.

You certainly want owners to return for regular maintenance, but they will only do so if the service experience is exemplary. And, it should be. High service satisfaction often leads to a greater likelihood of a repeat purchase. We all know the saying, "Sales sells the first vehicle. Service sells the rest." It's true and therefore even more important to remember that an exceptional service experience has three parts—**before, during and after**—and each is key in ensuring the high customer satisfaction.

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Let's Start with Before

Appropriate care and attention must be taken in advance to make booking a service appointment easy and convenient. Ensure your customer has multiple options from which to choose. This might be a friendly and knowledgeable voice during a phone call, an online appointment booking tool (simple to navigate and integrate with the DMS), or even a service advisor taking the time to pre-book the next scheduled appointment. Each of these options need to be customer-centric and provide efficient and effective ways of communicating the value in the required service.

Take the necessary steps to confirm the service date with the customer a few days prior to the appointment. Manage their expectations by outlining the time required to complete the service and determine the customer's needs. Do they require a shuttle

service? Do they need a rental vehicle, or if possible, a loaner? Do they simply want to wait at the dealership? Each of these options is unique and requires planning to ensure the customer is satisfied. Finding out this information in advance will help you plan and communicate with other team members who need to be involved.

You also want to prepare the customer for the service appointment. Are they a returning customer and familiar with the process? Or, are they new to your dealership? In either case, they need to be aware of the process when they arrive. Where is the service drive-thru? Where do they park? What is the walkaround process all about? Is it during a busy time of the day? All these factors should be communicated prior to the customer's arrival to help alleviate surprises or inconveniences.





Continue with During

The second part of an exceptional service experience is, of course, during the service itself.

This starts with having well-marked drive-thru doors or parking spots designated to make it simple for the customer. Ensure you have a greeter in place to provide a warm and friendly welcome, take any basic information, and start the transition to a service advisor. From there, the service advisor should confirm the service to be performed and offer to conduct a brief walkaround. The customer may not understand the point of the walkaround, so be prepared to explain the value and respectfully respond to any initial objections.

For example, you may want to explain that since most people only visit the service department a couple of times a year, this is an opportune time for a brief visual inspection of the vehicle and a chance to identify any other issues that could impede their driving satisfaction. Maybe there is a small dent they have forgotten about, but if reminded, they would like it to be fixed. Maybe their wiper blades are streaking, but it hasn't rained in a while so it's not top of mind. The same applies to scratches, stone chips, cracks in the windshield, or visible tire wear issues. This is not to "pick on" the

customer's vehicle, but rather to ensure it's returned to them in the best possible condition.

After the walkaround, it's advisable to explain in more detail the service to be performed. This will help address any initial questions and also manage the customer's expectations in terms of time and cost. Take, for instance, synthetic oil. It will cost more than traditional oil, but synthetic oil reduces engine wear and it doesn't need to be replaced as often. So, if there is an initial objection to the cost, point out the overall benefit and potential savings. You also may want to promote applicable service specials that are currently available. It doesn't have to be a hard sell, but if there is a savings or incentive offer, you owe it to the customer to bring it to their attention.

Find out the customer's preferred means of communicating. Is it by phone, text or email? Knowing this makes staying in touch easier for both of you.

Next, point out the dealership amenities while the customer either waits in the lounge or is waiting for the shuttle or loaner. Escort them to the lounge—don't just point

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to it. Present any refreshments available and make sure the coffee is hot and fresh. Offer many different options such as cookies, fresh fruit and other health-conscious choices. Provide free WiFi (it's expected) and make sure the customer has the access password. Be sure to tell them about any other special features you have at the dealership such as a café or even a massage therapist (which is starting to pop up in a few places)! Special perks like these often prompt invaluable, positive social media mentions about your dealership.

Dazzle with Communication

In terms of updates, if the service has been performed and no additional work is required, promptly contact the customer with the total cost and pickup details. If, on the other hand, other items have been identified by the technician, have a plan to communicate this to the owner. A best practice is to have your technicians take pictures of the areas in question, and then forward those images to the customer so they can see the work that needs to be done or has been done. In some instances, you may need to compare the replaced part to the newly installed part to identify the difference. Worn brake pads or dirty cabin air filters are common examples that are best shown alongside new parts to help identify the value in replacement.

You may also want to present your customer with the good, the better, and the best scenarios if there is a choice in parts. Or, provide some indication of the remaining lifespan if the customer were to initially decline the repair. If the brake pads will only last another 10,000 miles and their next service is not due until another 16,000 miles, well, it makes sense to replace them now.

Depending on the repair's severity, another best practice is to research the customer situation in advance of the next contact. Are they in a lease that's expiring soon? Do they plan to keep the vehicle for a long time? Have they expressed any interest in a new model? Your sales department may have the answers.

Does additional work need to be done? If so, you also may need to consider other contingencies such as an extension of the loaner or rental vehicle, transportation home for the customer who is waiting at the dealership, or even after-hours pickup of their vehicle.

A critical point is to be as transparent as possible when communicating additional work and the resulting costs. This is a sensitive area that if not handled properly, can lead to distrust and lower customer retention. You should prepare in advance to address these situations. Such preparation presents a better experience for both the customer and the service advisor. Communication with the customer and between departments is key to a successful service experience.

After the Service

After the service has been completed it's a best practice to send the final invoice either by text or email to avoid any surprises at the cashier. Try to set up a pickup time when a service representative will be available to answer any further questions. When speaking with the customer, review the repair order, and if possible, present any old parts that were replaced. This is the ultimate in transparency and for some discerning and even skeptical customers, this will validate that the work was completed. In some cases, a further



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walkaround may be required to present any other completed repairs such as paint touch-ups or dent removals. Before the customer leaves, check their satisfaction level and address any outstanding issues. Hopefully there are none, and you can then attempt to book their next service in advance.

Ensure the seats, mirrors, radio buttons, or any other customer preferences are restored to their original settings. Avoid making your customer embark on a small exploration amidst a jungle of cars to find their just-serviced vehicle. Simply handing them the keys and telling them, “it’s parked right outside” is typically not enough. Accompany the customer to their vehicle. And, if possible, have the vehicle washed or include a voucher for a car wash in cold weather climates or seasons. It is these small details that keep customers loyal.

24-Hour Follow-Up

Lastly, follow up after the customer has left, preferably within 24 hours to ensure they are completely satisfied and have no further questions. This final contact provides a lasting impression of your commitment to their satisfaction and allows for an additional “thank you” for their business. It’s also in the dealer’s best interest. Our research on follow-up after service shows that customers who do receive follow-up contact tend to provide a higher NPS than those who are not. Dealers want referrals to generate additional traffic and following up with

customers after their service is a great way of doing exactly that.

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One last word that may seem obvious, but it needs to be stressed. I have moderated a lot of service focus groups and customers consistently tell me about the importance of trust. It seems like common sense, but I was often regaled with stories of how the dealer said they did something, but then the customer discovered later that a particular service wasn’t performed, or a specific part wasn’t replaced. Remember, we live in a digital world. Your dealership’s reputation can be destroyed in only a few keystrokes when trust is betrayed.

Think Like the Customer

Implement these best practices based on your individual dealership’s needs, structure and existing processes. The key is to “think like a customer” and adapt as best as possible to their service needs. Today’s consumer has many options in terms of maintaining their vehicle, so ensure you are at the top of their list by planning for, and delivering an exceptional service experience—before, during, and after their visit.

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