

Who is Your Biggest Competitor?

Why more women shop the Net than your store

by Gerry Myers

You may be surprised to find that your biggest competitor may not be the dealership down the street, but the one on the info superhighway.

According to a 1999 article, "April 1999 Internet Demographic Survey," with research based on CommerceNet Consortium in Cupertino, CA, and New York-based Nielsen Media Research Inc., women's online purchases increased 80 percent over a recent nine-month period. While women's online purchases consist more of books, computers, clothing, CDs/videos and travel than automotive products, they do spend more time researching automotive purchases than any other category. The future could very well see the number of women overtake the number of men in buying and selling vehicles online.

Mall vs. dealership vs. the Net

Many women love to shop, but most women don't like shopping for cars. Ever wonder why there's this disconnect? If you have never contemplated this question, perhaps you should.

In the mall, women don't haggle over price. The product has a set price and you either buy it or you don't. In the dealership, women have to negotiate the price and often leave wondering if they got a good or bad deal. On the Net they don't negotiate the same way, but have to seek out the best price. Women feel their gender is undisclosed, so they believe things are more equal. In the mall, salespeople don't talk down to women. In dealerships, women are often ignored, patronized, treated like idiots or told to come back with their husbands. On the Net, she asks for help if she needs it, but is free to browse and seek information on her own.

In "Women, Car Buying & the Internet," author Marjie Lundstrom wrote, "Here's the gender bender. Women pay slightly more than men at traditional car dealerships – a bias that disappears altogether when women buy online."

Web sites for education

Research by American Woman Road and Travel at www.roadandtravel.com shows women spend approximately 17 weeks exploring and studying, mostly online, before making an automotive purchase. The site's focus is on furnishing a multitude of educational information for women from articles on "Buying a Used Car – Tips and Advice-Buyers Beware" to workshops on "Tips on Winterizing Your Vehicle." This site also offers a variety of reports, including "Summer Road Trip Preparations for Your Vehicle," "Buying Versus Leasing" and "GM Goodwrench: Making Oil Changing Easier." You do have to realize that General Motors is a key sponsor of the site, so while the information is good, just bear the bias in mind. This is true for other sites as well.

WomanMotorist.com is purely automotive and is obviously aimed at women. Some sites, like iVillage, focus their appeal to women and offer information in a diversity of areas.

While these sites have articles, data and links to other sites for women interested in buying a car, they also have health and beauty tips, financial information and childcare resources.

Web sites for buying

A number of sites offer car buying for both used and new vehicles. One very popular one is eBay. A female friend of mine recently sold her Lexus on eBay. Her experience was so good that her husband purchased his truck on it as well. As she told me, "Women will do anything to avoid a dealership." Even though the number of automotive purchases online is greater for men than women, the gap is closing.

Cartrackers.com furnishes both facts and the ability to buy and sell online. It also has a link to articles on Good Housekeeping.com such as "The Cars That Women Love" and "Your Next Car: To Buy or Lease?" The sites mentioned here are just a few of them available on the web. You might want to surf for others yourself.

Making sales to women

When doing research, consumers have a lot to choose from. Sites such as AutoTrader.com, Edmunds.com and Autobytel.com are a few of them. In other words, there is no brevity of places to search for information or to even complete the transaction if women want to be informed consumers or avoid the dealership experience. The uninformed woman who may have shopped for a vehicle in the past doesn't exist anymore. Today women are knowledgeable about what they want, what a fair price is and how they should be treated. If they don't receive that at a dealership, they will go somewhere else, and the options only continue to grow.

The best way to win women customers for life is to treat them with respect, be professional, follow up, provide more than is expected and always be there for them if they have a question or a problem. If that kind of an experience was created for every woman who walked into your dealership, most would become long-term customers who would refer their female and male friends to you.

If you wish to discuss this article with other dealers, or with the author, please go to the "Discussion Forums" at www.DEALER-magazine.com and enter the "Women" forum.

Gerry Myers is president of the Myers Group, a Texas-based company that specializes in helping the automotive industry market and sell more effectively to women, and Advisory Link, a Dallas-based corporation that focuses on creating and facilitating Exec-U-Link groups for executives, and forming women advisory boards for corporations. The Women Automotive Dealers' Exec-U-Link is one of several groups currently in operation.