

The Perils and Pitfalls of Buying or Leasing a Car

A personal story that questions, 'Has it really changed?'

by Gerry Myers

I tend to buy and keep cars longer than my husband does. He prefers to lease and trade every three years. As auto customers, we choose different options. We have different buying styles, too, which come into play when I participate in his leasing process.

You may have encountered this scenario: For a major purchase, she does her homework, researches online, talks to friends, shops in person in a couple of stores and then makes what she considers an educated decision. He, on the other hand, is not a shopper. As far as he is concerned, the sooner the process is completed, the better.

Leasing three years ago – The perfect storm

Because I have contacts in the industry, I set up an appointment at a dealership in our area, setting the stage for what I hoped would be an easy and pleasant buying experience. Unfortunately, the salesperson performed her role as what most car buyers would call a stereotypical car salesperson. What played out was the “Salesperson-Manager Shuffle.” This game entails the salesperson leaving the customer several times during the negotiation process to “go check with the manager.” The stormy scenario: She, (yes, it was a woman) quoted a ridiculously high figure as her lowest possible price. While the non-shopper might have caved and bought, I balked. She then lowered the figure, but not enough. With her insisting she could do no better, we were at a stalemate. And lacking trust in her willingness and authority to negotiate a fair deal, I announced we were leaving. She quickly shifted to “desperate-to-make-the-sale” mode, offering to renegotiate a better price than her previous, “low as I can go” price, but still way out of line. Additionally, the trade-in value she quoted was too little.

As an informed shopper, I had done research on the sticker price, Blue Book value of the trade-in and what to expect to pay as the reasonable net price for the vehicle. The car-buying equivalent of the perfect storm had come together — a new vehicle quoted much too high, a trade-in valued much too low and an educated buyer.

Eventually, to avert my intention to leave, she turned us over to the general manager. I willingly talked to him just to see whether he would make a fair deal to satisfy the customer, and by the way, lease a luxury SUV stickered at around \$50,000. Otherwise, I really would have walked. We completed the deal quickly from that point. It was as straightforward as him asking what it would take to make the deal. I gave him the figure I had arrived at based on my research. He ran the numbers and agreed. He knew I had done my homework and that the prices I mentioned for both the trade and lease payments were fair to all parties. It was that simple.

The more things change...

Three years later, when we were, again, ready to lease a vehicle, my husband took a different approach. He simply called around to various dealerships asking what the

monthly payment would be to lease the specific vehicle he wanted to drive. This time a trade-in wasn't a factor. After narrowing it down to one dealership, our strategy once again was to visit the dealership together to negotiate. Upon entering, my husband asked for the sales manager whom he had spoken with on the phone. He greeted us and immediately introduced us to "one of his top salesman." However, when I asked the salesman for a business card, he had to write his name on it, as his cards hadn't come in yet.

- Glaring problem number one: Why did the sales manager feel compelled to mislead us rather than just introducing us to the salesperson with whom we would be working? He was building a wall of distrust before we even started the process.
- Good point number one: The salesman was very courteous, engaged both of us in the sales process and answered any questions I asked. My husband and I test drove a couple of different models and left to discuss the decision.

We decided on the model and my husband continued the negotiation by telephone to confirm the specific model, options and price we had been quoted. But once he agreed to buy, the price and equipment kept changing.

- Glaring problem number two: Why does the price change from what was offered when the customer accepts the offer? I have seen this numerous times when I've been in dealerships with friends and family who were buying vehicles. Only after he fumed in frustration and escalated the matter to the sales manager was a similar car, without additional add-ons, found at the initially agreed-on monthly payment. A lame excuse for why the price had changed did not improve the sales manager's credibility, but eventually a deal was done.
- Good point number two: The dealership did finally honor the agreed-on figure. But why did it have to make the customer angry first?
- Glaring problem number three: Why could the sales manager make the deal, but not the sales person? The top complaint I hear from car buyers, and I share their feelings, is the Salesperson-Manager game, or "Let me check with my sales manager to see if we can sell the car for that." This is demeaning for both the salesperson and customer. Whatever the name – sales consultants, associates or order takers, the game's the same. They're a waste of my time if they can't make the deal.

More hassles at delivery

After endless phone calls and information exchanges between my husband and the dealership personnel, from salesperson to F&I, the day arrived when we were supposed to sign the papers and take delivery. The plan was to just drop by, sign the papers and drive away in our new car!

- Glaring problem number four: It took one-and-a-half hours from the time we entered the dealership until we left with the new vehicle. The paperwork was in disarray. Much still had to be filled out. Forms were missing. The new salesman had no backup and wasn't sure exactly what he was doing.

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The good news? We don't have to go through this again for another three years, at which time we may revert back to our former strategy of my being more involved in the process. But that shouldn't be necessary. While my husband's approach of calling around isn't my style or the best approach, customers vary greatly and dealerships should be equipped to deal with each customer and his own set of quirks.

Would we buy from this dealership again or refer friends? Personally I wouldn't. Would you?

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