

On-line options gain popularity with car shoppers

BY JOSHUA A. BRADLEY
Special to the Record-Eagle

When it comes time to shop for a new or used vehicle, more and more people are using the Internet to help them navigate the plethora of options.

In fact, depending on whom you ask, 65 to 75 percent of car shoppers use the Web to research potential vehicles at some point in the buying process. And nowadays, many shoppers never walk into a showroom at all, opting instead to both research and buy entirely on-line.

The shift in how people buy and sell cars creates many benefits and challenges for

the average car shopper, as well as for carmakers and dealerships across the country. But one fact remains: Cyber shopping is here to stay.

"Dealerships have to be on the Web," said Jim Hills, sales manager at Grand Traverse Auto. "You have to be accessible to the people."

From the customer's point of view, there are many benefits to shopping on-line. The Web offers a pressure-free forum where the customer can see photos, check reviews and safety information, compare vehicles side by side and even get quotes on vehicles they're interested in, as well as trade-in values for their current

vehicle.

According to Bill Labelle, Internet manager at Suzuki of Traverse City, the accessibility factor of the Web makes it a huge convenience for customers.

"The Web is a huge time and money saver," said Labelle. "You can get whatever information you need right at home without driving around to a bunch of dealerships."

For the car manufacturer and dealer, there are also many benefits to being on-line. The major advantage is that the Web allows for yet another pathway to the dealership, adding to the more traditional advertising approaches of TV, radio and print.

"The major benefit for the dealer is that the Internet gets your name out there," said Labelle. "It also allows for us to communicate with potential customers. On our Web site, we can list our inventory, or post service or interest rate specials."

The new customer

According to both Hills and Labelle, on-line car shopping has changed the profile of the typical customer. These days, when a customer comes into the showroom, they are much more knowledgeable than in the past. They are often armed with detailed information culled from a variety of on-line sources. They know exactly what they want and what the best deal is.

Hills says that dealers have had to adapt to this new customer.

"Dealers and salespeople have learned that on the Web you come into contact with customers a lot earlier in the buying process," said Hills. "When someone walks into the showroom, they usually buy within three days. When people inquire about a vehicle on-line, many times they don't buy for three or four months."

Even though consumers' shopping habits are changing, Hills says that there is still one key similarity: the test drive.

"Ultimately, when you narrow it down to two or three cars, it always makes sense to

go drive them," he said. "Cars are different to everybody. You might not feel the same way as the person or persons that wrote the on-line review."

Where to shop

Where do you go to find this valuable on-line information?

Car shoppers have four main Web site choices when gathering information on-line: the car manufacturers, the dealers, third party consumer-focused sites and on-line marketplaces.

Carmakers have spent millions of dollars to fine-tune their on-line presence. These sites are often flashy and meant to leave a lasting brand impression. However, they are also chockfull of extremely detailed information. You can find everything from current and future models and their specs, to the latest incentives, company history and more.

Hills recommended shoppers start their information-gathering at these sites.

"You can get all the model line-ups, and oftentimes these sites will directly link you to a local dealer," he said.

Dealer sites are an invaluable tool to check local inventories for both new and used vehicles, see current deals, contact salespeople, and get the ball rolling for a test drive near you.

Consumer-focused Web sites are the workhorses of the Internet. Sites like edmunds.com, consumerreports.org and Kelley Blue Book (kbb.com) are among the most popular, but there are many more. Shoppers can do just about anything car related at these sites: check prices, compare cars side by side, read independent reviews and check trade-in values.

Finally, on-line marketplaces have made finding the best deal a snap. Sites like ebay.com, autotrader.com and cars.com are very popular. Thousands of newspapers also post their classifieds on-line with both new and used vehicles for sale.

Locally, the Traverse City Record-Eagle has just launched a new Web site (RecordEagleAUTOS.com)

that combines the inventories available at many local dealerships. Here, shoppers can find a vehicle that interests them, figure their monthly payment, make sure the vehicle is in stock and set up an appointment for a test drive.

In addition, RecordEagleAUTOS.com offers many search options. Visitors can search by salesperson, vehicle, price, payment or dealership — which currently include Grand Traverse Auto, Williams, Voice Motors, Dan McCormick, Cherry Capital, Traverse Motors, Suzuki of Traverse City and the Used Car Factory.

Overall, auto experts agree that the key thing to remember when shopping for your next vehicle, regardless if it's on-line or in the real world, is to do it in a way that makes you feel comfortable and the most informed.

"Everybody responds to cars in a different way," Hills said. "Some people want to see, touch and feel. Others just want the data."

Joshua A. Bradley is a local freelance writer.

THIS ISSUE

On the cover: Ray Szmoniak, technician at Traverse Motors with the dealership's new diagnostics system. Photo: Record-Eagle/Douglas Tesner

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