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Dealership Marketing: Direct Mail vs. SEO

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Auto buyer research revealed that 9 of 10 car buyers will use Google or Yahoo search engines to find a dealership for their next car purchase. Direct mail has not proven to be this strong, especially since the Internet took.

Actually, the internet has helped sustain the direct mail method by allowing contact data to be captured. This capability launched list companies that sell specialized marketing lists based on numerous criteria. Before this, lists were pretty much only available by certain zip codes. Mailing to a particular is more of a branding effort and not a sales generation method, because you can only expect a maximum of 2% of the mailing to go to qualified leads. Mailing to a list that that is based on job title and has a lease ending within 3 months is more qualified and *should* get a higher return.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) on the other hand delivers highly qualified leads every time (if implemented appropriately). To take advantage of this platform, you must be able to be found in a search which means your web pages need to be optimized well enough to earn a high organic (unpaid) result placement. Most users will not look beyond page one results (and certainly not beyond page 2). Increasing your organic ranking means your website code, content and functionality have to be easily read by the search engine spiders that index the web.

The internet is a viable platform for retail, including car dealerships. No matter how much you try to rationalize the process away from it, the web isn't going anywhere – it will only get stronger. If you haven't already, start changing your perspective and marketing methods to include internet sales...at some point your bottom-line will depend on it. My theory is make the move before your competitors and reap the benefits of an early adaptor.

As I mentioned earlier, SEO at it's best launches your website to the top of the search results list based on selected keywords. There is Pay-Per-Click (PPC) marketing which is paid placement at the top of the search results. Both are relevant and accomplish different goals. Even if you place at the

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top through Paid Search, you always want to rank at the top organically. This is statement to consumers that you have earned a place there by having a good website with relevant content. SEO also compliments PPC, the better you're your organic ranking, the less you end up paying for click-throughs. The majority of users will click on the unpaid placement even if there is also a paid placement ad there.

To get the best organic ranking and keep it (harder than you think), you may need to hire a skilled employee, talented freelancer or even a worthy company to implement the strategy. Because SE algorithms change frequently and without notice, having a skilled eye on your campaigns can ensure you keep top ranking as long as possible. Plus, I have another theory that you will end up wasting more time and money by trying to save time and money doing this work yourself. The gurus are immersed in the platform daily and have expansive knowledge of the broad and tedious aspects that can make you successful and keep you from getting "black-listed" by search engines.

Having 11 years of marketing experience, I believe all marketing plans should be diverse based on your target market, available media and budget. That said, I generally recommend client, especially dealership clients, to focus on internet marketing, but not abandon direct mail. Direct mail is still a good method to keep in contact with past customers and it enhances the effort for the internet plan. Many clients have successfully used direct mail to drive traffic to their site, where significant conversion were made.

To sum it up, especially for dealership lead by those not fully embracing the internet opportunity, you do not need to forget about everything you have learned in your career to implement internet marketing and sales. The personal touch and great customer service still holds significant value to car buyers, you simply have to enhance your previous plan with the technology your customers are embracing....and they are embracing it. Perhaps think of it as a minor "detour" – placed by your consumer.

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