

The Customer Reigns #1

By Karen Dillon

Who is the most important person in your dealership? That's right, the customer. And making sure that customer is satisfied has become vitally important for you and your dealership. We began hearing the acronym "CSI" from the manufacturers a number of years ago and, as more and more incentives are tied to this index, dealerships face increased challenges as they continue to look for ways to satisfy their customers. Nowhere is this more difficult than in the service department. When a customer purchases a new or used vehicle, there is the initial euphoria of ownership, which assists with increased customer satisfaction; however, when the car is in for maintenance or repairs, we don't enjoy that same customer outlook. Many times, the attitude of the customer is more negative - from the inconvenience, cost or both.

Improve CSI

In order to improve customer satisfaction in the service department, a definite process must be in place.

- The management should regularly reinforce to the entire staff the importance of satisfaction in service, as well as in the sales department.
- A tool should be provided that offers ease and convenience for the customers to schedule real-time, online, confirmed service appointments through the Internet. The use of such a tool will increase customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, customer retention, service department efficiency, service department revenue,

reduce in-bound telephone calls to the dealership and drive traffic to the dealer's website.

- Service advisors should be continually trained in sales and customer service techniques so they are prepared, in advance, for each customer as they enter the service drive. This includes reviewing all service history on the vehicle, confirming all necessary parts are available, researching vehicle recall status and being prepared to offer services for which the vehicle is due that the customer had not requested when making the appointment. The most effective and customer friendly approach is to take time to discuss the recommended services with the customer, explain their vehicle is due for such service, what the service entails and how it benefits them. This open communication creates trust which results in increased profits, customer loyalty and customer satisfaction. Many dealerships have begun utilizing a service menu, which is a very low-key and effective way to up-sell needed maintenance to customers.
- The initial contact with the customer when they enter the service drive is of utmost importance. This is where the service department relationship can be established and nurtured. The service advisor should greet them by name on the service drive – not wait for them to walk up to the advisor's desk- and his entire attention should be focused on the customer in front of him.
- A complete walk-around of the vehicle should be performed with the customer.
- Fluids should be topped off and the customer should be informed of this when picking up their vehicle, so they are aware you have gone the extra mile.

- A multi-point inspection should be performed, with the checklist clean and easy to understand by the customer.
- The first impression is very important and, just as important, is the last impression. When the customer comes in to pick up their vehicle, again reinforce the fact that the dealership values their business. This is communicated in a number of ways - the positive attitude of each dealership employee, a vacuumed, washed car, a coupon for a free car wash, or a coupon for the next scheduled maintenance. An effective and inexpensive idea is a note from the service manager thanking them for their business. These can be printed in advance, attached to each repair order and, in the event the customer has any questions or concerns, should provide either the service manager or customer relationship manager's contact information.

Recapture Your Customers

Addressing and improving customer satisfaction in the service department will reflect in increased customer traffic and increased revenue. However, a system should also be devised to re-capture customers lost to independent repair facilities. A startling statistic shows nearly 70% of new car buyers choose service facilities other than the selling dealership during their ownership cycle. Capturing this business is critical to the dealership, both in service department revenue and customer retention.

Dealers have attempted to address the customer perception that competitive facilities are more convenient and less expensive by offering express-lane service for maintenance items and posting their pricing in the service department. Many have

also extended their service department hours, offering more evening hours and, in some cases, weekend hours.

Some other recommendations to re-capture these customers include:

1. Regularly reinforce to the entire staff the importance of retaining customers in service.
2. Establish a process and hold key people accountable to ensure the service department is presented fully to each customer at the time of delivery of their vehicle. At that point, the sales person should:
 - Communicate that all dealership associates are aware the customer has many choices for purchasing and servicing their vehicles and emphasize the dealership's commitment to earn the customer's business in both sales and service.
 - Introduce the service manager and/or service advisors.
 - Discuss the dealership's highly trained technicians and explain they are specialists for the particular vehicles the dealer is selling.
 - Discuss the dealership's investment in specialized tools and equipment to enable them to properly maintain and repair today's vehicles.
 - Review the normal maintenance required to keep the factory warranty and/or extended service agreement in effect and explain the dealership maintains all service records.
 - Log the customer into the dealer website, registering them to make online appointments and schedule the customer's first service

appointment, thus beginning the customer's relationship with the service department.

Spend the time and effort necessary to be certain everyone in your service department, whether it is the service manager, service advisors, cashier or anyone else who has contact with the customer, understands the importance of treating every customer with special care. This will pay huge dividends in happier customers, repeat business and additional revenue.

Karen Dillon is the President of TimeHighway.com, the world's premier, real-time, online scheduling service for automobile dealership service departments. You can reach Karen at KDillon@TimeHighway.com, 239-438-5359 or www.TimeHighway.com.