

I'm a voyeur. I spend time, when I have it, looking at other dealers' inventory. I review their web sites and peer into the window of their online dealership. Sometimes I even get excited when I see a dealer breaking the mold and taking online inventory pictures to the next level. It's a sickness, I know, but I must do it.

While I am proud of my dealership's presentation of our vehicles, I am always striving to get better. So the question arises... how do you get better? How do you make your vehicles stand out compared to the competition? I've attended Cars.com trainings, AutoTrader seminars, KBB presentations, and the lot. All offered valuable information and I've adopted at least one idea or more from each session I've attended.

I look at pages and pages of used cars and trucks. Listing after listing of the good, the bad, and the ugly scroll across my screen. Now and then, I find something amazing. Since I am a spying deviant, I may even steal their ideas. It is then I ask myself, "I wonder if they do it by themselves or if they have been blessed with the best picture-taking vendor on the planet?" Inevitably, when I get the dealer on the phone, I learn it is all them.

The one constant that began standing out when I made these calls is that the dealerships that do it best maintained in-house control of their pictures. Now, this is just what I have found. I understand there are companies such as Dealer Specialties, CarTHINK, and Dealer Source that provide excellent service to dealerships. Some of these franchises share amazing relationships with their respective dealers and have a seamless process to put the best product online. I do find, though, that this is not always the case for everyone. Just join a networking forum like automotivedigitalmarketing.com and you will hear pleas from the top Internet sales professionals begging to have more control over their pictures. After all, the presentation of a dealer's inventory online has a direct impact on their bottom line, not the vendors. Mediocre pics don't much affect the vendor taking the pictures unless their feet are being held to the fire to increase quality and productivity. These requests to vendors apparently don't always go fulfilled.

When peeking into the online window of another dealership's inventory, I ask myself:

How do they position their used vehicles?

What is the quality of their pictures?

How many of each do they take?

Is all of the information of the vehicle's features and options listed?

Do they have engaging comments written about the vehicle that grab your attention and tell a story?

Are there pictures of their new vehicles?

Are they offering a video of the vehicle?

Do they provide a 360-degree rotation of the interior or exterior with color swatches?

Does the listing page offer similar, comparable vehicles to consider?

A reputable vendor in the area offering its services for our inventory pictures recently contacted me. Now, for those of you who know me, I am pretty protective over how I run my dealer's BDC and Internet department. I fight for what I believe works. In my dealership, I handle everything in-house. It doesn't work for everyone, but it does for me. Don't get me wrong. Without a strong online inventory management tool, we'd be toast, but we manage our processes well. I am lucky to be located directly across the street from a high school. Every year, we hire three of their students. They are our online inventory specialists (OIS). Since this is a slightly more affluent area than some, the school offers photography. The students we choose (essentially from a referral program from the last OIS) must be high-honor roll students, have taken photography and also creative writing classes. A clean driving record is also imperative. They are paid the same as if they were working at the local grocery or video store, but the responsibility is far greater. And their position, I'd like to believe, is more emotionally rewarding as well. It has to be cool to say, "Yeah, I've got to go drive and take pictures of that Mustang convertible on the rack over there."

- Opposed to a vendor that spends 10 or so hours every week using our lot to take pictures, the OIS students work roughly 45 hours a week collectively and provide my department so much more support.
- They do not charge by the number of pictures like some vendors do, so 20 pics are mandatory. Unlimited pictures can be taken, though, if told to do so. That's control.
- Since the OIS is taking creative writing, they personally write captions/comments for every used vehicle.
- They take all pictures needed for our web site whether it be an event that we are promoting or even pics of new sales representatives.
- They do Photoshop work on whatever new mail campaign or e-blast we dream up. (You'd be shocked how technologically advanced high school students are. They even blow me away. Sometimes they even handle IT problems!)
- The OIS generates, prints, and distributes all letters for the sales department out of the CRM (as well as handles the printing and stuffing of mail campaigns).
- Lastly, but just as important, they assist me with the mystery shopping, gathering, and analyzing of all competitive pricing from local dealers.

Best of all, I have total control of their productivity and the final product with no worrying about accountability. This works extremely well for our dealership, but that is because we have a team in place to manage them. They work among my entire BDC and Internet team and contribute to the daily activities because they are one of us. I believe this is the perfect scenario for my dealership.

Even with my preferred set-up, the vendor did push and push to talk about its "streamlined process." (Have they ever tried to find all the keys needed for pics in an inventory of 200 used cars? Not easy and never quick. It is a process that could only be streamlined at Utopia Motors on the corner of Fifth and Heaven.)

My owner, like every owner, needed to look at the bottom line. He couldn't base a decision on quality and productivity, but could on dollars and cents. So I created a simple savings analysis comparing the fee of the potential vendor and its own inventory management tool versus the cost of my online inventory specialists and our online inventory management tool. As you can see in the chart I've provided below, I did have to bury some numbers for privacy reasons, but I am keeping the true savings cost at the bottom. If you ask, I will gladly shoot over a template of this to anyone who wants it.

If you have the ability and the team to do your pictures in-house, even if you don't have the capacity to bring aboard brilliant, little, hard-working high school kids, you must, in good conscience, do a comparison between both alternatives and see what makes the most financial sense. I can tell you, though, how good it makes me feel and how much credibility it gives our dealership that we do offer this program to students when I'm speaking to members of the community at local Chambers of Commerce meetings.

After showing this analysis to my owner, I was able not only to retain my online inventory specialists, but he allowed me to buy them a ritzy camera. We are also currently building them their (our) very own studio. How's that for a little snooping?

Controlling your pictures in-house will not work for everyone. As a matter of fact, I still learn about the newest and best technologies and trends from dealers that pay quality, third-party vendors. (Handling it in-house does give me the opportunity to experiment more. Also, third-party vendors don't refer high school students to purchase vehicles either.) My way offers our dealership more control, more support in other departments, and, I believe, a higher quality online presentation. As the chart supports, it can benefit to be a dealer's "picture-peeping Tom."

Joe Webb is the Internet sales manager of Arlington Toyota Scion in Buffalo Grove, IL, as well as a charter member of AAISP.