

Efficiency Calling

Software improves efficiency in service department scheduling.

By Karen Dillon

Are your customers returning to your dealership for scheduled maintenance? Probably not. Dealerships have lost more than 80 percent of non-warranty service business to the independents. This is a huge source of lost revenue for dealers.

Lack of convenience is the number one reason customers don't return to the selling dealership for service. Price and trust are numbers two and three. If your dealership provides the convenience, this will allow you to capture these customers and will increase opportunities to earn their trust and educate them about the fact you are very price competitive.

I recently had the opportunity to interview Scott Jewett, fixed operations director at Scholfield Auto Plaza, of Wichita. This dealership carries Lexus, Acura, Jaguar, Mercedes-Benz and Porsche. Scott really enjoys the part of his job that allows him to try new ideas and projects that help move the mark in the dealership by implementing processes that produce substantial results and make a difference. His dealership recently faced the challenge of how to more efficiently handle their service appointment scheduling.

The dealership writes about 1,400 ROs a month and, as a high-line dealership, were not adequately handling the volume of customer calls. This created customer service issues as customers were not able to get through. Their business has grown tremendously over the last couple of years and from the beginning they had trained their customers to make appointments with

their service advisor. This was found to be self defeating; as business increased and the number of incoming calls went up, it became impossible for a service advisor to answer the calls or return all messages left in a timely manner.

Nobody's fault

Scott would get calls from upset customers who had called two or three times just to schedule a routine service. The thing that surprised him was they were not at all upset with the service advisor, Dave. If he told them he would speak to Dave they would say "No, please don't; Dave's great and I don't want to spoil my relationship with him." They just wanted Scott to know that the level of service was not acceptable. The dealership has a very loyal customer base and it was clear to customers that the service advisors were doing a good job, but they that were overloaded and that this needed to be resolved by management.

To better study the problem, the dealership installed phone tracking software. Initial findings indicated that all calls accounted for four hours and 59 minutes per day per advisor; this represented a substantial portion of their day. As it was physically impossible for the advisors to handle all incoming calls during peak times, operators would also take messages and they would pile up on the advisor's desk, with customers not receiving a return call for hours.

Scott wanted to find a solution to the problem that did not involve hiring additional advisors, as the current advising staff was able to handle the balance of their duties; the volume of calls was simply too high when combined with the rest of their responsibilities.
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In the past he had been worried about having an inexperienced person handle the appointment scheduling; there were many variables and things the advisors knew that enabled them to handle differing circumstances and, when needed, “fly by the seat of their pants.” However, many of these points are integrated into service scheduling software which enables someone less experienced to handle the scheduling. This allowed them to put a semi-trained person in the position of appointment coordinator and they have been able to competently handle the job.

Where's my car?

Another issue at Scholfield was scheduling loaner cars. They have 63 loaner cars and it was a daunting task to keep track of them and know how many were available at any given moment. As a high-line dealership, most customers require a loaner when making an appointment.

They previously kept track manually and, due to human error, would have seven or eight cars sitting unused on the lot that they could have put customers into on any given day. Instead, they turned those customers away. With an average RO of \$300 to \$500, this left a great deal of money on the table. The reverse was also true; it would sometimes be highly embarrassing to have a customer turn up for a scheduled appointment and find that the loaner cars had been over-promised and were not available.

They would then have to race around to find a rental car for them, which would take time; and, of course, the customer who scheduled his appointment with a loaner four days before would not understand what was happening. By improving utilization of the loaner fleet, they have increased the number of appointments scheduled, increased the number of ROs written and increased their CSI. The system ensures consistent, full scheduling each day.

As an indication of how their new process with the service scheduling software has helped, Scott did a study of phone traffic, comparing eight days in June, prior to installing the service scheduling software with eight days after installing the solution.



He came across an article about an online scheduling product and decided to try it. The software interfaces with their ADP system and automates the entire appointment-setting process. He found that this streamlined the process internally to allow someone with less experience than a service advisor to take the customer's request and translate it into an appointment.



The result was a reduction of inbound calls to the service advisors by 96 percent. The service advisors now have more time to spend with customers on the service drive up-selling needed services and answering their questions. As an additional point, while the calls to the service advisors were reduced, they actually had a 29-percent increase in incoming calls. Because the calls are now handled more efficiently, more customers are able to get through.

Making the call

Two months after implementing the system, the dealership had two record months back to back. Scott Jewett said the stress level is much lower. Most importantly they've been able to handle the extra business without hiring more service advisor staff. There have been fewer upsets from both customers and employees. They have more time to spend with customers, which has, of course, increased their sales penetration.

According to Scott, his customers are not as concerned about cost; they are more concerned about convenience and how well they are treated. That takes time. The new system he has implemented has gone a long way in allowing the dealership to have that time.

The dealership is preparing to offer this tool on its Web site, which will allow customers, 24 hours a day and seven days a week, to schedule a confirmed service appointment.

This is a great example of what can be done to make it more convenient for customers to do business with the dealership. Remember, the primary reason service customers defect to other providers is a perception of greater convenience.

Recapturing this business is critical to the dealership both in service department revenue and customer retention.

Making it more convenient for customers to use your service department can help win back these service customers.



Karen Dillon is the President of TimeHighway.com, a real-time, on-line scheduling service for automobile dealers' service departments. ■


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