

# Why Net and Why Now?

By Karen Dillon

We all know the primary driver of long-term profitability is customer loyalty.... and providing top-notch customer service fuels that loyalty. But acting on such knowledge is surprisingly complicated. As dealerships search for ways to improve sales and service revenue, along with customer satisfaction and retention, the need to look for ways to maximize the use of available technology is critical.

Customers utilize the Internet for so many things – banking, shopping, travel, research, etc. These are not just younger customers who grew up using the Internet, but customers of all ages who have discovered the convenience it offers. Why not provide your customers the ability to go to *YOUR* website at *THEIR* convenience and schedule a real-time, online, confirmed service appointment? The majority of dealers today offer only a “request for appointment” on their website; however, this request still requires someone at the dealership to respond to the customer either via telephone or email. This request form doesn’t get used to any great extent, as the customer still doesn’t have a confirmed appointment until they hear from someone at the dealership, prompting them, most times, to pick up the telephone to call to make the appointment, so they can plan their schedule accordingly.

In most dealerships today, the service advisors still take the incoming calls for appointments. The reasoning behind this is they are the personnel who know how, what and when to schedule. If you elect to utilize an online appointment program, it should be

robust, full-featured and properly developed with the services you offer, the service duration and service depth of each. This can simplify the entire appointment process by not only providing your customers the ability to schedule from your website, but also allowing any of your personnel internally to book the appointment and not be concerned about overbooking resources. What does this accomplish? More time spent by the service advisor with the customer on the service drive, creating happier customers who are not hurried through the write-up process, as well as allowing more up-selling of needed services, creating more revenue for the dealership.

Any appointment system you select should be flexible enough to allow your dealership to set up your appointment books so your business is enhanced and not hindered. For instance, if your dealership books by service advisor, the program needs to have this flexibility. It should provide proper notification to the customer – a confirmation email, confirming the appointment, a courtesy reminder email the day prior to the appointment, which will reduce no-shows, a completion CSI email thanking them for their business and requesting a contact with any concerns, as well as an email to any customer who failed to show up for an appointment. This form of communication is unobtrusive and, if you surveyed 100 customers who have email access, I think it's safe to say at least 90% would prefer an email to a telephone call from the dealership. It should also allow the customer to re-schedule or cancel their appointments online. An easy user interface is of utmost importance as well, as it will increase adoption by both customers and dealership personnel.

The four major complaints that customers have regarding the service department are:

1. When calling to make a service appointment, they are placed on hold for an extended period.
2. Delay in being waited on when bringing vehicle in for service.
3. Not being notified of repairs made to vehicle or when vehicle is completed.
4. Not meeting the time deadline promised.

Using an online appointment scheduling tool will eliminate complaints #1 and #2, as the customer can make their own appointment at their convenience, reducing the number of telephone calls to the dealership. Reduction in the number of incoming calls allows the service advisors to greet the customer and spend time with them during the write-up process.

*“We love online scheduling, as it gives customers the power to make their own appointments and they seem to feel they are more in control. They really like the ability to make the appointment at their convenience, either at home or at work, with their calendar in front of them, and not having to call the dealership and sit on hold.”*

Ron van de Kraats  
Service Manager  
Prestige Imports

Costs for a quality online service appointment scheduling program for most dealerships will be in the \$400 - \$500 range, which is minimal – especially considering the many benefits provided:

- Increases customer satisfaction.
- Increases customer retention.
- Increases service department efficiency.
- Increases service department revenue.

- Reduces in-bound telephone calls.
- Drives traffic to the dealer website.

A very high percentage of customers today utilize independent repair locations for scheduled maintenance. Why? They perceive these facilities to be more convenient and less expensive. Our focus must be on recapturing those customers we've lost and retaining our new customers. How do we do this? Customers must be made to understand how much the dealership values their sales and service business. When the customer purchases or leases a new or used vehicle, a process should be in place to do a proper delivery, which must include introducing the customer to the service department and reviewing the importance of a well-maintained vehicle, pointing out that no other facility can repair or maintain the vehicle as well as the dealership, as they have properly trained technicians and the latest equipment. At this time, the customer should also be made aware the dealership offers the convenience of online service appointment scheduling and their first service appointment should be set, thus beginning the relationship with the dealership service department.

Of course there are, and will always be, a certain group of customers who want to call the dealership and talk to someone to schedule an appointment; however, there is a growing number of customers who would quickly adopt the use of online scheduling. In the interest of customer satisfaction and retention, you should provide both groups of customers the ability to schedule as they want.

Failure to recognize the power of the Internet and the many advantages its use can bring to your dealership will hinder your ability to compete in today's competitive environment.

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