

MANAGEMENT GAMEPLAN
BY SCOTT BERGERON

SEX APPEAL STILL SELLS, BUT NOT IN THE WAY YOU'D THINK

New Meaning for Today's Consumer

Sex appeal has taken on a whole new meaning in dealerships, with female consumers dictating a new definition of what constitutes sexy. In part, this is because we are now, whether or not you want to admit it, living in a female decision-maker world, especially in the car business. So, the sex being appealed to is increasingly women – turning the stereotypical female sex symbol paradigm on its ear.

Sure, you'll still see female models next to this year's new vehicles at the car show,



and I really think that's because most dealers are used to it. On the showroom floor, though, males still make up a larger percentage of salespeople.

Working with clients is now very much a business transaction. Engaging the customer and respectfulness are absolute musts, no matter who you're working with. Priorities are what they probably should always have been, but now it's critical salespeople demonstrate an appreciation of how a prospect thinks instead of how they look.

Yes, there may be exceptions – but I wouldn't place a bet on testing it out. Smart consultants will be best served by prioritizing the business end of the deal over any flirtations, harmless or otherwise.

Do good looks even matter on the showroom?

That's actually a trick question. It's logical to assume an attractive salesperson will have a natural selling advantage because humans naturally are attracted to good looks. However, I wouldn't put a lot of time into how a sales

consultant looks but how they perform, and how they treat their customers and meet their performance goals.

So, while good looking people shouldn't be excluded from sales job considerations at all, it just shouldn't be a priority. Instead, prioritize hires first and foremost for as many of the following attributes as possible: intelligence, integrity, common sense, good instincts, product knowledge, communication skills, closing ability or inability, likeability and the ability to serve with a smart, consultative approach.

While each dealership's priorities will be dictated by their specific situations, make sure job candidates get at least a passing score on each attribute. And for existing sales reps, reinforce solid performance in each of these areas as often as possible. As part of this, make sure they're tuned into the "little things" that can make or break a deal.

For example, when the salesperson greets a prospect couple, he or she should be very deliberate about engaging both

equally, shaking both of their hands. If a male salesperson only engages the man, he's likely lost all credibility with the couple.

Decision-makers have shifted from sexy figures to solid facts.

Today's car-buying culture has clearly shifted from shapely figures to solid facts. While sexy winks and stellar bodies may carry influence, buyers are much more about the facts behind pricing and performance.

The majority of prospects have already made decisions about the makes and models they're interested in and what the price point needs to be. They likely also know about performance pluses and minuses. They've checked reviews from multiple sources, and often know many details about key performance indicators and specific model idiosyncrasies.

So, salespeople not only need to be well-informed about each make and model, but be able to add something to the conversation to help a prospect confirm their predetermined choice.

For example, last year's Consumer Reports – a respected and supposedly unbiased review authority – gave the Subaru Crosstrek less than stellar ratings about everything from lack of power to noise inside the vehicle. Yet consumers seem to love the brand, borne out by anecdotes detailing their three-word response when asked about it: "I love it."

This is a case where "facts" take on a new dimension – adding personal accounts and preferences to a long list of specs, performance ratings and reviews. The enterprising salesperson can direct consumers to some of this information and ask key questions, which can help cement decisions.

One such question is the powertrain issue. If a prospect prioritizes power over handling in the snow, another make and model may crystallize as the best choice. If, however, snow maneuverability is a must, the Crosstrek may be just the right choice.

As far as pricing, the days of pricing "car sharks" are all but gone, a concept reinforced by recent CarMax commercials. The slap-on-the-back, hard-negotiating sales processes are fewer and further between than ever before. Now, instead of base price, negotiation may revolve around such value-added options as premium interior extras like high-end car mats, or wheel and tire combinations to further customize a buyer's selection.

Also more than ever before, consumers are savvy about sales clearly aimed at liquidating inventory quickly, and are likely to push for the max. Salespeople need to be prepared to provide answers beyond, "Let me speak to my manager."

Emphasize sexy surroundings instead of people.

One area where looks matter is the dealership décor itself. Dynamic and dramatic displays, conspicuous cleanliness, and a clear commitment to an upscale environment all contribute to a more effective selling stage. In facilities ranging from hospitals to government buildings, consumers have become accustomed to fancier, more contemporary and elegant surroundings.

To the extent possible, your dealership should emulate this approach. When a dealership sales floor and service area exude cleanliness and class, it reassures consumers. In contrast, dingy and dirty environments can in and of themselves be deal-breakers.

Bottom line, looks definitely matter, but not in the way they used to. Make the physical plant sexy while emphasizing smarts and sensitivity with your salespeople. Your bottom line will thank you for it. 🚗



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