

6 Steps to Buying the Perfect Dealership Software

Dealers know a thing or two about big, complex decisions. As you know, customers wrestle with vehicle purchases every day. You answer their questions and wait through the number-crunching and the weighing of pros and cons. You watch husbands call wives and wives text husbands for second opinions before finalizing anything. You guide them through it, because you're the expert and you've seen it all before. Yet when it's time to make a big purchase for your dealership — like new software — suddenly you're the one in analysis paralysis. You're also the one thinking several steps ahead, trying to anticipate whether the software will meet your needs and solve your problems, worrying about whether you'll regret or celebrate making such a big investment.

I've been in the automotive business for years, on both the retail and software sides, so I know that choosing dealership software is a big decision. And like any big decision, it's complicated. It takes time to research all your options. Your choice affects almost everyone in your business. Staff turnover and competing priorities can derail the purchase process.

But don't get discouraged! If you can help customers buy the right car, you've got what it takes to buy the right dealership software. This six-step plan will put you on the right path.

1. Don't do it alone

If your team isn't invested in your new software, it doesn't matter *what* solution you pick: They won't use it. And why pay for something that won't get used? That's why it's critical to get your team's buy-in now. So assemble a committee of key players from every department, and start asking questions. What problems do they have with the current system? What do they need the new one to do? The software you choose has to meet these needs.

Many dealers make a major mistake here: They forget about their salespeople! Salespeople can be your biggest software users, so they've got to have a voice. Tenured, consistent salespeople will bring an important perspective to your committee.

Beyond your committee, make sure the rest of your team feels involved, too. Full-company meetings, e-surveys: However you do it, asking for their opinion makes buy-in way easier to get.

2. Start with the end in sight

The only way you'll find a system that meets your needs is to actually *know* what you need. So make sure your committee agrees on what your ideal solution should do.

Will it improve existing processes or put new ones in place? What gaps should it fill? What about the vendor — will they offer post-sale support? Does their software integrate with your other systems? As you answer these questions, write down the features and capabilities that are non-negotiable for you, and keep them on-hand as you research.

Once you've nailed down your needs and your processes, look for software that can automate as many tasks as possible. Your system should automatically complete no-brainer tasks like sending reminders to your team or running reports. If it doesn't, people will forget, balls will be dropped and mistakes will be made.

3. Prioritize value over price

Software is a big investment. But if you choose the right solution, it can have even bigger returns. Today's vendors know what they do well, and you really do get what you pay for. So as you're working out your budget, remember that a slightly higher price can be worth it if you're getting the functionality you need.

Still, keep an eye out for integration costs, overages and user licenses: These add up fast, and you can usually avoid them. Now's the time to read the fine print!

4. Get the lay of the land

You're not the only one exploring the software market. So when you're researching your options, don't reinvent the wheel. Check in with your sister dealerships or employees who have used other systems in the past. How did they like their software? What kind of support did the vendor offer? Get as much trustworthy insight as you can.

Online forums are another great place to find dealer reviews of software — but take them with a grain of salt. No matter how great a solution is, you can count on at least one customer leaving a nasty review. And don't forget about vendor websites! Even before you sit down for a demo, you can learn a lot about vendors by their online presence.

5. Take a test drive — or two

Software demos are the best way to figure out how well a system meets your needs. But don't let the vendor run the show. Ask questions! You should know whether or not a software system meets all your requirements by the end of your demo. Don't settle for a yes-or-no answer — find out *how*. A "yes" with one system could be a faster, easier "yes" with a different one.

As you demo more systems, you'll probably think of follow-up questions. So don't be afraid to demo the same software more than once. You can ask the vendor to record the demo, too, so you can review it later.

6. Make it unanimous

Once you've picked your top choices, you're at the last — and most exciting — step: making a decision. But don't rush these final moments. Like I said earlier, you need to get your team's buy-in here.

It's time to reassemble your committee of key dealership players. Present your notes from the demos — features, capabilities and pricing. Talk through how your top systems meet the needs the committee expressed earlier. And then let everyone have their say. Take all the time you need. Bring in lunch if you have to. Do whatever it takes to get your team engaged, so you can agree on a solution that's a good fit for everybody. When you reach a consensus, make the decision and own it!

Buying the right software takes time and effort, but there's nothing better than finding a system that does everything you need and delivers the ROI you want. So how about it — ready to start shopping?

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