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FROM BROWSING  
TO BUYING

How to Steer a Car Shopper's Path to Purchase

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A MOTIVATED MARKETING WHITE PAPER



## NAVIGATING CAR BUYERS' PATH TO PURCHASE

The road that car buyers navigate can be filled with twists and turns, hardly ever represented by a straight line from initial search to final sale. But this isn't necessarily bad news for marketers, because the longer the path to purchase, the more time automotive dealerships have to steer shoppers. Most dealers put creative agencies in the driver's seat, content to ride shotgun while marketers launch campaigns to target buyers.

Nielsen surveyed 43.5 million Americans in 2017, finding that 18% of adults planned to buy or lease a vehicle in the next year.<sup>1</sup> These shoppers can be divided into two categories: those who have a good idea of the vehicle they're seeking - and those who don't.

These two groups are distinguished by the amount of time they'll spend shopping, with undecided shoppers' path to purchase stretching miles longer than their decided counterparts. Roughly 60% of shoppers fall into the "undecided" group, presenting an excellent opportunity for marketers to do what they do best.<sup>2</sup>

1. <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2017/the-fast-lane-to-vehicle-sales-understanding-the-paths-to-purchase.html>

2. *Automotive Shopper Path to Purchase*, Millward Brown Digital and Polk, September 2015

## IDENTIFYING “DECIDING MOMENTS”

For car buyers embarking on their path to purchase, these five “deciding moments” can make or break a sale:

### *1. Which car is best?*

During the preliminary shopping stage, car buyers gather information about different vehicles. They check specs, safety ratings and consumer reviews to determine which models to keep on their lists and which to cross off. The number of photo searches for a particular brand increased 37% year-over-year, which proves shoppers are doing their research online before they ever get on the lot.<sup>3</sup> Traditional media, such as TV and radio, is often employed to raise brand awareness during the “Which car is best?” moment.

### *2. Is it right for me?*

Now that the car search is officially underway, shoppers typically pause a moment to list their non-negotiables. These are the features that they can't - or don't want to - live without, like a 3rd row or a V8 engine. This is the ideal moment to reach the “consideration set” through digital marketing, such as YouTube and Facebook videos, paid search and display ads.

### *3. Can I afford it?*

Next, shoppers often take budget into consideration, if they haven't already. They take a good look at their finances to determine if they'll purchase new or used, or decide to lease instead. Because they're starting to narrow their list based on online research, a buyer in this stage is best influenced by Facebook and YouTube video as well as display ads. And since they're likely only considering a few vehicles at this point, remarketing is also incredibly useful. Ads featuring the most searched vehicles will draw a buyer's eye because the content is highly-targeted and relevant.

#### *4. Am I getting a deal?*

Smartphones have changed the car-buying game. Today's shoppers are now able to stroll across a dealership's lot while scrolling through prices on their competitor's website. In fact, one in two smartphone owners use them while at the dealership,<sup>4</sup> with the majority using them to double-check that they're getting the best deal.<sup>5</sup> With buyers so close to making a purchase, dealerships are wise to engage nearly every marketing platform, including traditional media, paid search, social and remarketing.

#### *5. Where should I buy?*

With their research complete, most shoppers head to the dealership. But which one? Recent research shows that buyers only visit 1-2 dealers on average (down from 5 in 2005), so it's important to win the "deciding moment" if you want yours to be one of them.<sup>6</sup> A combination of traditional and digital media serves dealerships well, ensuring they don't miss a single opportunity to attract buyers.

3. Google Trends, United States, September 2015 vs. September 2014

4. 2015 Google / TNS Auto Shopper Study - United States. Consumer Barometer=500

5. Automotive Shopper Path to Purchase, Millward Brown Digital and Polk, September 2015

6. Sales Autonews.com; Polk Data. 1.6 test drives - Google Global Gearshift Study US cut 2017; YouTube Internal Data, go/zootube, video views on Test Drive knowledge graph ID /m/0543r\_



## DRIVING EACH “DECIDING MOMENT”

Because a vehicle is a major investment for most consumers, the decision isn't often an easy one. Each shopper is searching for a vehicle that fits their budget and lifestyle, whether they're a mom most concerned with safety or an active millennial who needs a vehicle to haul their outdoor gear - and the friends they'll enjoy it with. Or an eco-minded driver who values fuel efficiency as much as a pick-up purchaser does towing capacity.

Think about a “deciding moment” as a pitstop along the path to purchase. Often, the key to winning each one is simply being present. For instance, if your target buyers are Facebook junkies, meet them on social media. If your audience is less tech-savvy, introduce yourself during the commercial breaks of their favorite shows. Or use the radio waves to transmit your message.

While being there when consumers are looking is crucial, it's not enough. Your dealership must be there with the information they're seeking: estimated value of their trade, MSRP of a new model, a comparison of safety ratings, etc. When a car buyer shifts their search into high gear, your dealership must not only make an appearance, but make an impression.

Brands have the greatest influence during the initial search stage, but they can't lose contact once a potential buyer has progressed to the next “deciding moment.” Because the car-buying process doesn't always follow a linear path, shoppers may add and erase vehicles from their lists at any stage of the process. Maybe a bad dealership experience made them question if they're truly getting a deal. Or perhaps they decided to reverse back to the “Is it right for me?” moment after taking a test drive.

For dealers, the fact that many buyers visit a dealership without first submitting a form online (74%) or making a phone call (45%),<sup>7</sup> adds yet another zigzag to an already nonlinear path. Measuring a campaign's success won't always be easy, but remember that an effective marketing campaign is just as responsible for getting buyers on the lot as the vehicle they arrived in.

*7. Google automotive data*



## LAPPING THE COMPETITION IN TODAY'S MARKETPLACE

There's no denying it. The car-buying process has changed dramatically in the last decade. Instead of waiting for a shopper to wander onto their lot and then delivering their best sales pitch, today's dealers now have 24 opportunities to influence the car-buying process. Of these 24 touchpoints, 19 are digital.<sup>8</sup>

While partnering with a full-service advertising agency ensures dealers take advantage of each influencing opportunity, this statistic proves that automotive dealers refusing to incorporate digital will be left in the dust before long. It's all about presenting the right message to the right audience at the right time – and this simply can't be done without combining digital and traditional marketing.

Even the most old-school dealers can't deny that the times are changing. It's nearly impossible to ignore digital marketing's benefits with statistics like these: 95% of car buyers cite digital as their primary influencer.<sup>9</sup> Users perform over 20,300 auto searches per minute.<sup>10</sup> There are two times more test drives on YouTube than on the lot.<sup>11</sup>

Whether they're searching or streaming or scrolling through their newsfeeds, car buyers have gone digital. And dealerships must do the same to stay ahead of the competition. But keep in mind that digital is just one strategy used to reach shoppers, and before deciding which other ones to use, brands must understand the “deciding moments” that shape consumers' path to purchase.

8. <https://9clouds.com/blog/from-clicks-to-sales-how-auto-leads-move-through-digital-car-sales-funnel/>

9. *Automotive Shopper Study*, Google, comScore, Jan. 2017

10. *Google Automotive Retail Summit data*

11. *Sales Autonews.com; Polk Data. 1.6 test drives - Google Global Gearshift Study US cut 2017; YouTube Internal Data, go/zootube, video views on Test Drive knowledge graph ID /m/0543r\_*



## PARTNERING WITH MOTIVATED MARKETING

Motivated Marketing partners with brands every step of the way, providing the strategy, creative content and support needed to get results that exceed expectation. Our team works hard to provide the most compelling creative, always keeping budget in mind.

While we're not exclusively an automotive advertising agency, our client list of dealerships is practically a mile long. We understand the industry. We know your audience. We love to create high-octane, jaw-dropping ads that they can't ignore.

**If you'd like to learn more about steering car buyers' path to purchase and partnering with Motivated Marketing to do so, give us a call at (843) 856-7322 or email [info@motivatedmarketing.com](mailto:info@motivatedmarketing.com).**

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