



What Makes a Five-Star Dealership Review?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What motivates your customers to write absolutely glowing reviews – those five-star shout-outs that attract more customers to your lot? On the other hand, why do customers write blistering criticisms that cost you sales and create permanent heartburn?

At a time when **eight out of 10 shoppers** use online car reviews and car dealership reviews to inform their purchase, these are no small questions. So, at DealerRater, we decided to find answers.

We examined **1.4 million reviews of dealerships** and salespeople that customers wrote on Cars.com and DealerRater.com in 2017. We compiled the most common phrases that appeared in both the most positive and negative reviews to uncover the common themes.

We discovered some compelling reasons why customers love dealerships – and we identified the main reasons why customers complain about their experiences.

The results of our proprietary research provide a north star for dealerships that strive for five-star reviews.

What You'll Learn from this Report

- Why customers love some dealerships – and why they dislike others
- What makes your salespeople shine
- Pro tips for how to inspire customers to write five-star reviews

Anatomy of a Five-Star Review

Based on our research of reviews, here are the top five reasons customers leave five-star reviews:

- 1 The dealership provides a consistently great experience on the lot and in the service lane.
- 2 The dealership's entire staff acts like customer service professionals.
- 3 The purchase process is painless.
- 4 Customers feel like they get a deal – but not necessarily the lowest price.
- 5 Dealerships offer hands-on experiences with vehicles.

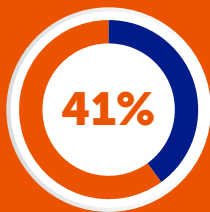
Now let's take a look at the detailed findings.



What Makes a Dealership Look Great?

1 THE DEALERSHIP PROVIDES A CONSISTENTLY GREAT EXPERIENCE ON THE LOT AND IN THE SERVICE LANE

The ability to provide both a great buying and service experience is the single-most important factor influencing positive dealership reviews. Customers call out a great buying experience as the second-most important attribute contributing to a five-star review. But great service overall, including an excellent service department, constitutes the most important factor. Customers have high standards: the words **“great customer experience”** or **“excellent customer service”** occur most often in positive dealership reviews, followed by variations of **“best”** or **“great buying experience.”**



More than **47,000 phrases**, or **41 percent** of positive content, single out a great experience from purchase to service.



PRO TIPS FOR DEALERSHIPS

The purchase is just the beginning.

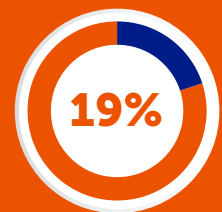
The service lane is where a dealership's reputation is really made. Customers often use phrases such as “best service department” in explaining why they rate a dealership highly. In fact, a great buying experience sets an expectation that the dealership will follow through with excellent support in the service lane.

2 THE DEALERSHIP'S ENTIRE STAFF ACTS LIKE CUSTOMER SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Words such as **“friendly,” “helpful,”** and **“knowledgeable”** emerge often in positive dealership reviews. Note that the entire staff make a difference. We often find phrases such as **“everyone”** and **“staff”** associated with high praise.

Overall, these are the attributes that make up a winning staff:

- **Being approachable.** Being friendly and showing a sense of humor are frequent themes in positive reviews.
- **Being helpful.** **“Everyone helpful”** is an enormously popular phrase in strong reviews. And what does being helpful mean? Most often, helpfulness comes down to answering customers' questions thoroughly, asking the right questions, and assisting in the customer's research. Helping a customer find the right car and then test drive it definitely puts customers in your corner.
- **Being low-key.** Providing a stress-free experience goes a long way. Phrases such as **“never felt pressured”** and variations of it account for buyers giving dealerships props – so often that **“Stress Free”** is a category unto itself.



More than **21,000 phrases**, or **19 percent** of positive content, single out people, especially for being friendly, knowledgeable, and helpful.



3 THE PURCHASE PROCESS IS PAINLESS

Speed and ease of service throughout the entire buying process are essential. Phrases such as “**buying process easy**” crop up often in reviews, along with words such as “**didn’t waste time.**” Once customers are at the buying stage on the lot, they’re eager to act. They don’t want to wait around completing paperwork.



PRO TIPS FOR DEALERSHIPS

Speed and simplicity are key.

Examine the buying experience from the moment someone is on the lot to the moment the customer drives off the lot. Test your own process by assuming the role of the customer and critiquing your approach. How long does the process last? How easy is it? Are there any opportunities to digitize some processes such as the completion of finance paperwork?

Salespeople can relieve pressure on the car shopper by:

- Giving customers the time they need.
- Reading each person on the lot and adjusting their sales approach accordingly. As we’ve noted in other research, not every person on the lot is motivated to buy. People who are doing initial research are not ready to talk price and do a test drive.
- Making customers comfortable. Offer to clarify any questions they have. Listen to them carefully. And do little things such as offering amenities to make their stay comfortable.

4 CUSTOMERS FEEL LIKE THEY GET A DEAL – BUT NOT NECESSARILY THE LOWEST PRICE

One of the top attributes of a highly rated dealer is offering a deal. Shoppers want to feel like they get the “**best deal possible**,” a phrase that comes up often in positive dealership reviews. We also see “**great price**” and “**price wanted**” appear frequently in strong reviews – but not “**lowest price.**”

Shoppers simply want to feel like they are being treated fairly – which is not the same as getting a rock-bottom price.



PRO TIPS FOR DEALERSHIPS

Explain the why behind the price.

Is the manufacturer offering a special promotion that wasn’t offered a month ago? Does the price include features that you believe are especially important to the shopper you’re talking with based on their budget and lifestyle needs?

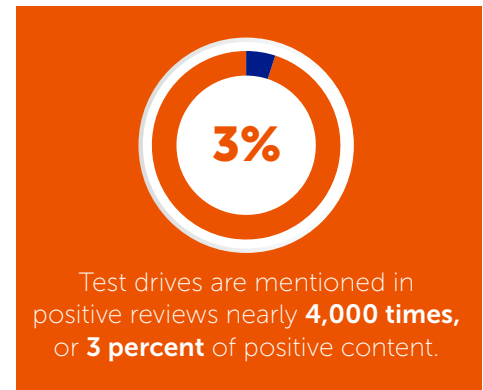
Take time to provide clarity

Price is definitely a topic which shoppers typically have questions and uncertainty. Taking time to explain a price and why it’s the best deal possible for a shopper – with your data cross-checked against what shoppers are finding on sites such as Cars.com – will make the difference.



5 DEALERSHIPS OFFER HANDS-ON EXPERIENCES WITH VEHICLES

When you offer test drives, you look good. Test drives are mentioned in positive reviews almost as frequently as providing a stress-free environment. The decision to buy a car may come down to two people shaking hands on a lot – but experiencing the vehicle creates the all-important emotional connection. Dealerships may discover, though, that shoppers on the lot are not yet interested in a test drive, especially if they are at the initial phase of planning for a vehicle. That said, if a customer contacts a dealership ahead of time to set up an appointment, making it clear that you'll have a car prepped for a test drive sends a message that you're making their visit a top priority and encourages the shopper to get behind the wheel.



What Does a Bad Customer Experience Look Like?

Bad Service and Maintenance

Bad service and maintenance dominate the themes that appear in negative reviews. And what do bad service and maintenance look like? Here's what we found:

- ▶ **Slowness.** The phrases "*oil change*" and "*tire rotation*" appear often in bad reviews, as do the phrases "*2 hours oil change*" and "*3 hours oil change*." When we took a closer look at the data, we uncovered a root problem: people expect procedures such as oil changes and tire rotations to be fairly easy and quick – and when dealerships take longer than expected, customers write negative reviews. Dealers need to take a closer look at the expectations they are setting and manage their service pipeline more effectively. Let customers know ahead of time that if they're dropping off their cars on an especially busy day, their service may take longer than normal.
- ▶ **Surprises.** Many of the problems in the maintenance category relate to check engine or tire pressure lights coming on, most certainly with used cars. An engine light coming on, in and of itself, does not inspire a negative review. The problem happens when dealers don't address these surprises. The best way for dealerships to avoid these problems occurring is to ensure that their inventory is properly prepped and free of defects – or manage expectations if a car has known issues. If a surprise happens after a customer drives off the lot, dealerships need to understand how upset a customer is going to be and address the issue immediately – or offer alternatives such as loaner cars if the issue takes time to fix.
- ▶ **Not minding the details.** Complaints about temporary tags appear often in negative reviews. The complaints typically came down to sloppy management of temporary tags, such as issuing tags that had expired or making a customer wait for them. Dealers who don't manage these crucial details well will likely reveal other signs of sloppiness such as dropping the ball with scheduling maintenance or neglecting to return phone calls in a timely manner. Good service means thorough service. Bad service means lapses in attention to detail.



People problems

Unresponsive staff loom very large in negative reviews. We found frequent instances of phrases such as **"won't return phone calls"** and **"never called back"** in negative reviews. To be sure, being busy is often a sign of success. But to stay successful in the era of the on-demand economy, dealerships need to be more responsive than ever. Especially in the always-on mobile age, customer expect near-instant responses. It's time for dealerships to step up their game.

In addition, perceptions of the finance department influence negative reviews, with customers expressing confusion and distrust of the person managing the terms of their financing. Here is an opportunity for finance professionals to improve their standing by offering clarity around how financing works and which options are best for the consumer, just as salespeople need to explain the **"why"** behind pricing.

At a time when online financing is becoming an option to customers, your finance team needs to work more like a customer service team to build customer goodwill.

Setting the Wrong Expectation

Another common theme among negative reviews: dealerships failing to set the right expectation with their marketing, especially for service. A common complaint: advertising free oil changes that turn out to be anything but free. Setting the right expectations comes down to consistency in what you say and what you do – all across the online/offline world.

Dealerships should re-examine the accuracy of your content on your website, third-party sites, and anywhere else customers encounter your brand. If you are running a service promotion with a limited shelf life, make sure you remove the content when the promotion ends. Ensure that the details about your on-the-lot inventory are consistent with the content of your digital VDPs. Get the basics right to build trust.

What Makes a Salesperson Look Good?

Service, Service, Service!

The most common phrases in five-star salesperson reviews are **"great customer service," "excellent customer service,"** and **"best buying experience."** These findings underscore two realities:

- **People make the brand.** When salespeople make customers happy, dealership reviews also benefit.
- **Great salespeople are not salespeople.** A sale is a transaction. A strong relationship based on customer service means business for life

BOTTOM LINE: getting a great customer review comes down to acting like a customer service representative.





Partnering Like a Consultant

When you look at both positive dealership and positive salesperson reviews, a common theme emerges: salespeople distinguish themselves by being knowledgeable and taking time to ask questions and listen to understand what the customer really wants. In fact, so many reviewers use phrases such as **“answered every question”** in strong dealership reviews that the ability to provide clarity to the buying process emerge as a top factor influencing positive reviews. It’s also no surprise that clarity occurs alongside the ability to satisfy first-time buyers.

No Pressure

“Never Felt Pressured”: salespeople should take those words to the bank. They appear often in positive reviews of salespeople. It’s no surprise that words such as **“easy”** and **“stress free”** also appear in the most positive reviews. The fact remains: buying a car can be stressful even under the most ideal circumstances. It’s one of the most expensive purchases a person will make in their lifetime. Customers want help making a decision, yes, but they also want to relieve the stress of making this decision.

Win on the Lot

Now that you know what makes for a good and bad review, you can step up your game by treating customer reviews as a process that you manage all year round. Reviews are not a necessary evil. They’re a source of differentiation. We recommend that you assign a team member the job of monitoring, responding to, and managing the publication of reviews as a crucial function. For more insight, check out [The DealerRater Guide to Online Reviews](#). As discussed in the guide, a reviews program not only improves your overall performance but also contributes to improvements in areas such as employee turnover. **Get ready to win with reviews.**



PRO TIPS FOR DEALERSHIPS

Capitalize on goodwill – ask for reviews.

Doing so shows confidence in your dealership and generates more great reviews. Don’t be shy. Ask customers for reviews. And use tools such as DealerRater LotShot to help make the process fun and easy.

About DealerRater

Founded in 2002, DealerRater®, a Cars.com™ (NYSE:CARS) company, is the world’s leading car dealer review website that connects consumers with the right person at the right dealership. With a reachable audience of more than 31 million consumers monthly³, the site offers 4 million sales and service reviews across 41,000 U.S. and Canadian dealerships, including a network of more than 5,600 Certified Dealers. By offering a product suite that allows qualified dealerships to manage their reputations and achieve higher SEO rankings, DealerRater supports new customer connections by growing online presence.

1. Cars.com, “Review Usefulness and Recency,” November 2016.