

The Columbus Dispatch

PATRIOTISM, INCENTIVES HELP ATTRACT CAR BUYERS

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Illustration: Photo, Graphic

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Melanie Alves hadn't planned to buy her first new car this week.

But motivated by no-interest financing and a desire to do her part for a faltering economy, Alves went to **Ricart** Automotive's Ford dealership Tuesday to test-drive a new Mustang convertible.

"My dad told me, 'Now's the time to buy a car,' " said Alves, 23, of Columbus, who estimates she'll save several thousand dollars on a five-year loan. "If we as consumers get out and spend money, the economy will be OK."

Lured by zero-percent financing and other incentives, consumers are returning to central Ohio showrooms after an absence sparked by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and suburban Washington.

But sales were still down 16 percent nationally through Monday compared with previous weeks, and with uncertainty about the economy and possible U.S. military action, dealers don't know when business will return to normal.

"It may never be normal because (the attacks) have had so much effect on all of us, professionally and emotionally," said Steve Germain, president and chief executive of Germain Motor Co.

Sales had been slowing before the attacks, and sales typically lag in September. But local dealers report that in the days after the attacks, sales dropped by as much as half of normal levels.

While the 100-member Columbus Automobile Dealers Association won't get sales numbers until next month, many dealers experienced "basically a shutdown," Executive Director Tim Doran said.

Only a handful of people came into Hugh White Honda Downtown during the five days after the attack, said Don Smith, general manager.

Nationally, daily sales were off by as much as 42 percent, according to data collected by consultants J.D. Power and Associates.

"I think what we saw was a consumer in a state of shock, bewilderment and mourning," said