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Buying experienced: Auto dealerships entertain, feed, inform, baby-sit and, oh, sell cars, too

By Adam Sichko

Not so long ago, new- and used-car dealers earned their livings primarily by selling and servicing cars.

That hasn't changed, but competitive pressures have added a new look, feel, smell and taste to the art of salesmanship.

The once-typical offerings of generic-brand coffee and doughnuts have given way to Starbucks coffee shops and full-service restaurants. Flat-screen plasma TVs and climbing walls entertain would-be buyers. Laptop users can find wireless Internet access. Children can play arcade games or romp in areas designed for them.

They're all efforts designed to get you into that new or used car, and keep you coming back years after the initial sale.

"A little bit like when you go to Disney: You get a little bit of everything," said Rhett Ricart, president of Ricart Automotive Group.

His new million-dollar showroom will open by the end of the summer, with video-arcade games, flat-screen TVs and a play area for the kids. His eight-turn, 6-acre test track for prospective car buyers is expected to be ready this week.

"Everyone's changing the experience for a competitive advantage," he said.

Germain Motor Co. will open a \$30 million dealership in September that will offer Wi-Fi work areas, a shoe shiner, a fireplace and chandelier, a play area and merchandise shop. Company plans also call for a franchised coffee shop and, later, a diner.

"I think everyone's trying to find the new niche, and we want to make buying a car an event again," said Jeff Parker, general manager at Germain Cadillac. Germain Cadillac and Germain Mercedes Benz will move into the new complex, located near Easton Town Center.

"It helps with retention, helps with having customers be more engaged," said Brian Kramer, general manager at Germain Mercedes Benz. Adding amenities is the industry trend, said Rick Germain, the company's chief operating officer.

"To stand out and 'wow' people, you have to stand out in terms of the services you provide," Germain said. "Anytime you can provide someone with a great experience, that goes a long way toward developing loyalty."

But not every area dealer sees the need to turn toward the elaborate to better retain customers. Flat-screen TVs and other more elaborate amenities aren't good investments, said Jeff Mauk, owner of Jack Maxton Chevrolet.

"We're more into the customer-service end of it," Mauk said. "We make it easy for people to do business with us."

Ron-Rush Lincoln Mercury would prefer to invest money in expanding and improving its "loaner" fleet - rental cars given to customers while their cars are in the shop - than adding elaborate amenities, President Mark Rush said.

"I hear that alternate transportation is more important than flavored coffee," said Rush, who's examining the costs and benefits of installing Wi-Fi for customers. "If I can put time back into their schedules, then we're being convenient."

One industry analyst said he thinks that amenities won't have more than a marginal effect on retaining customers. The push to add amenities "doesn't address price, it doesn't address convenience in terms of distance, and if you think you've got a real problem, you're going to go to the dealer, anyway," said George Hoffer, a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University who specializes in consumer issues in the automotive industry.

Paul Taylor, chief economist for the National Automobile Dealers Association, cautioned that the extra bells and whistles aren't going to fool many customers if the quality of maintenance drops.

"The key is, there has to be steak with the sizzle for it to be effective over the long haul, and that's what dealerships are striving for," Taylor said.

Sometimes, the manufacturer dictates what dealers will do to improve their dealerships. That's the case with the new Toyota store that Byers Automotive is working on. The company told Byers that the new facility must include amenities such as a play area, said George "Buddy" Byers Jr., chairman of Byers Automotive. The pressures to attract and retain customers are especially high for franchised dealerships, Hoffer said.

"And you need ways to patrol for new business," and adding amenities is one way to do that, he said.

Ricart plans to use the new test track at his used-car center in Groveport as just such a lure. Technicians will be able to take a vehicle for a spin with the customer to better assess what needs to be fixed. Vehicles can be driven up to 60 mph, and the road contains occasional bumps "to get the car rattled around and see how it handles and absorbs shock," he said.

"It's hard for somebody to have a good buying experience when they're buying a sports car but can't really see what it can do," Ricart said.

But in order to keep customers coming to their dealerships, especially after the sale, quality of service remains the key to retaining customers, dealers say.

"The NO.1 thing the customer wants is things done the right way, but NO.2 is to feel comfortable while that's being done," said Jeff Brinkley, president of Roush Honda, whose dealership also features a play area for kids and Internet access.

Service and maintenance is still what matters most, Byers said.

"The customer isn't going to come back to you if you can't fix his car," he said.

By the numbers:

48% -- Dealers that have completed a major remodeling within the past five years

22% -- Dealers that have remodeled within the past two years

45% -- Dealers whose last remodeling project included a new vehicle showroom

36% -- Dealers whose last remodeling project included upgrades to customer areas, such as waiting rooms

Source: National Automobile Dealers Association