

BIT CONCEPTS

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New Ideas to Boost Your Sales **By Dennis McDonough**

A report called *European Auto Sites' Usability Gap* published in April by Forrester Research found serious usability issues with web sites for European auto manufacturers. The report's executive summary states:

“A third of Europeans rely on the Web for researching their car purchases, but auto manufacturer Web sites continue to frustrate by concentrating on image rather than usability. Testing auto site usability via Forrester's Web Site Review methodology reveals that every European site reviewed has serious flaws – flaws that will either stop users in their tracks or slow their journeys down. To address these problems, sites must immediately boost levels of practical, useful content and functions while addressing accessibility and privacy issues. . . .”

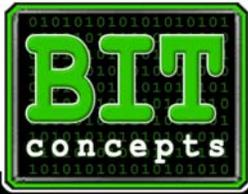
The summary goes on to state that sites must develop “robust personas” for key target audiences (that is, distinctive appearances for the audiences they are trying to reach) while meeting both site visitor goals (finding information about a car or dealership) and brand manager needs (making the products look good).

While the report specifically targets the problems with manufacturers' web sites, dealers can learn a lesson from it, too. And the kind of problem described in the Forrester Research report isn't limited to Europe only. You have probably encountered those kinds of web sites that put image above usefulness. For the past few months we have been telling you how to humanize your web site (adding pictures and motion while avoiding anonymity), but it seems that sometimes those humanizing elements can be taken too far. While it is good to have the elements we have described over the past few months on your site, you should keep in mind that they are just that – *elements* of a site, not the entire *content*.

The Important Question and Its Answer

There are five magic words in the summary of Forrester report: “practical, useful content and functions.” And for whom is the content to be made practical? The answer should be obvious. Let's put it another way. When developing or revising your dealership's web site, the question you should ask is, “What do my customers need to know?” not, “What do I want my customers to see.” In short, you need to make your web site customer-focused.

A customer-focused web site provides information and relies less on image and glitz. The elements we have described (pictures, motion, and contact details) should act as support to the information your site provides. Your site should be a combination of practical content (sales events, current models in stock, search capabilities, service specials, etc.) and interesting features that make your site engaging and keep your customers coming back.



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You need to avoid using all the various tricks that can, as the report summary states, “stop users in their tracks or slow their journeys down.” What happens when potential customers access your site and they get inundated with pages of useless animations, pictures and other elements? The same thing that happens when they don’t get straight answers from you: they go elsewhere.

Your dealership web site is a reflection of how you do business. Are you open and accessible, or do you hide behind glitz and too much image? Do you tell your customers what you have for them, or do you show only a single model in action? Do you show your customers the faces of the people who are ready to serve them, or do you assume that salespeople and other dealership staff are irrelevant and just focus on how cool your cars are?

Treat visitors to your web site the same way you treat customers who walk into the door of your dealership, with courtesy, honesty, and purpose. You will win their business and their loyalty.

And *that* can help you increase your sales.

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