



The Art of Online Reputation Management

A guide to building trust and transparency through reviews





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Introduction

As a car dealer during the Covid era, you know that maintaining a positive reputation is more important than ever to your business's short- and long-term success. Shoppers are increasingly completing more of the car-buying process online, and your reputation is one of the first things they'll look into when considering whether to buy a vehicle from your dealership. To win these shoppers, it's crucial that you manage and maintain your online reputation.

Not only do reviews build trust with shoppers, helping them choose one dealership over another, but they also benefit you, the dealer. CarGurus dealers with a 4-star or better average rating receive nearly 50% more connections than dealers with a 1-star average rating¹. Plus, a stellar reputation will help you earn the prestigious **CarGurus Top-Rated Dealer Award**, which helps you bolster a cycle of trust and transparency between your dealership, existing customers, and in-market car shoppers.

Luckily, there's a lot you can do to grow your reputation online. Here are some strategies for managing your reputation and building trust in your dealership.



Your dealership brand and your employees

There's a reason big brands spend millions of dollars on splashy advertising campaigns that humanize their businesses and make them more relatable to consumers: people love a good story. But it doesn't take a massive budget to achieve the same results.

In fact, building a great brand story doesn't even start with marketing: it starts with your employees. Jeff Siegel, VP of Marketing at Cracker Barrel, emphasized this at CarGurus [Navigate](#), telling dealers that employees play a critical role in defining – and portraying – a winning brand.

“ To tell a great story, you have to have a great story to tell... Your frontline staff are your most important marketers. They control every interaction with your customer. If they're trained right, if they understand and believe in your story, your brand will come through.”

Of course, this requires training your employees on how to deliver an exceptional experience and represent your brand well. Educate them on your expectations, and above everything, lead by example. How you treat your staff determines how they treat every car shopper that walks onto your lot. With your entire team aligned, you'll be on your way to a stellar brand and reputation in no time.



Training questions to consider:

Does your staff understand your dealership's brand story? Do they share the same values?

Does your staff know what to do on the busiest days of the month?

Does your staff know how to make a customer feel comfortable where they think they're going to lose?

Does your staff know what to do when a customer pushes back?

Does your staff know how to recover when a customer has a terrible experience?

Building a reputation in the age

The internet and the introduction of digital retail tools have changed the way buyers and dealers connect. With today's shoppers able to buy vehicles online and have them delivered right to their doors, you might not ever have the chance to meet your customer in person. That's why it's crucial to think about your reputation early and consider all aspects of the shopping journey. Is your website easy to navigate? Do you respond to leads promptly and with the requested information? Are you transparent about pricing and paperwork or delivery logistics? If the answer is yes to these questions, then you're on your way to collecting positive reviews and building a powerful reputation in your community.

Especially during the current inventory roller coaster, it's also important not to ignore shoppers even if you don't have the car they're looking for. They can still leave a positive review on CarGurus based on their experience with your dealership—and they'll remember how you treated them the next time they're shopping for a vehicle.



Establishing trust through online reviews

“Customers know when they’re going to get a great experience because they do a lot of online research. They see that we have good reviews. When they come in and they meet our staff, they instantly know that they made the right choice.”

CarGurus Top-Rated Dealer, Shrewsbury, MA

With brand advocates in your employees and your reputation in mind from the start, you’ll be able to begin establishing trust with shoppers. People want to be sure they’re in good hands before choosing which dealership to buy from. One way many shoppers find trust is by reading customer reviews and talking to friends and family. At **Navigate**, Widewail Founder Matt Murray spoke about the importance of trust – specifically, distributed trust or opinions from real people – during the car-buying process:

“We need other people to help us understand what’s important or what’s safe...This is how we consume everything. Our new reality is that our customers sell each other. We rely on each other.”

This is illustrated by the fact 87% of car shoppers find reviews helpful when shopping for a vehicle². Even more, 59% of CarGurus shoppers say they always look at a dealer’s reviews before contacting them³.

In addition to improving consumer confidence, reviews are a great way to strengthen your dealership’s brand and see what’s working and what’s not. Today’s most effective dealers view every review as an opportunity to get valuable feedback and a chance to retain an existing customer or influence a potential one.



Collecting reviews

If you don't ask customers for reviews, your dealer rating could suffer. That's because the average customer who comes to your store and has a great experience isn't thinking about rushing home to write a review for your dealership. They're not on your marketing team, so they're not concerned about helping your dealership stand out.

Asking for feedback might feel uncomfortable at first, but it's a crucial step for dealers who want to build trust, boost brand awareness, and ultimately, sell more cars. At Navigate, Matt Murray challenged dealers to think about collecting reviews as a way to influence their "brand mosaic," or, all the different experiences that make up a customer's path to purchase. Plus, reviews are nothing to fear. Widewail found that dealers who actively solicit reviews average a 4.515 rating. And CarGurus data backs this up: more than two-thirds (69%) of CarGurus shoppers leave a 4-star review or better⁴.

Do

- ✓ Hang signs promoting the sites where you want customers to leave reviews
- ✓ Include a physical card with instructions for leaving a review with paperwork from the sale
- ✓ Follow up with buyers to ask for feedback and request a review

Don't

- ✗ Offer incentives in exchange for reviews
- ✗ Ask customers to leave reviews while at your dealership
- ✗ Allow people with a relationship with the dealership to leave reviews



Monitoring and responding to reviews

Once you start encouraging customers to leave reviews, it's crucial that you also start paying attention and responding to them. Set up email alerts, appoint an employee to be your review watchdog, or simply do a quick Google search of your dealership from time to time—there are plenty of ways to keep a pulse on your dealership's online reputation.

Monitoring reviews also puts you in a good position to respond promptly to them. Acknowledging reviews—both good and bad—shows that you take customers' experiences seriously and can help build trust with future buyers. Review responses are also a vehicle for injecting some of your dealership's brand personality online, helping to create a more authentic engagement with a customer. At [Navigate](#), Siegel encouraged dealers to always be listening to customers, both in-person and through online reviews, respond to and fix bad experiences, and keep telling a positive story about your brand.

Integrating reviews into your marketing strategy

Siegel also challenged dealers to tell their story in a way that speaks to their audience – and what better way to do that than by leveraging customer reviews in your marketing efforts? Consumers feel better when they hear real-life stories from other buyers, which makes reviews an incredibly powerful marketing tool for dealers.

So how do you integrate them into your marketing? Here are some tips:

- Spotlight your best and most helpful reviews in your email newsletters and on your website
- Incorporate them into your SEM ads
- Link to your website's review page in your email signature
- Include customer quotes in your print materials
- Share stellar reviews on social media

By putting the customer's voice into your marketing strategy, you'll give a nudge to those ready-to-buy car shoppers who just need a little social proof to decide which dealership to buy from.





CarGurus Top-Rated Dealer Awards

“ It is a privilege to be able to put that sticker there at the front door and have the plaque right there on my desk. It gives me credibility and validation to online shoppers because it’s all about trying to communicate and convey that trust with someone whom I’ve never met. It really puts me ahead of my competition.”

CarGurus Top-Rated Dealer, Gulfport, MS

Established in 2015, the CarGurus Top-Rated Dealer Awards have become the mark of quality in the industry, recognizing the dealers who go above and beyond to provide exceptional customer service. They’re based on hundreds of thousands of reviews from car shoppers nationwide and are given annually to a select group of CarGurus dealers with the highest average dealer ratings.

To qualify for the prestigious award, dealers must meet several criteria, most importantly:

- Maintain an overall average dealer rating of 4.5 or higher*
- Have a minimum of five verified reviews collected within the year
- Have active inventory on CarGurus

*Though they are still available to users, we do not include reviews older than two years when calculating a dealer’s overall rating.

How reviews work on CarGurus

Many shoppers depend on reviews when choosing which dealership to buy from. For this reason, we make every effort to keep our users’ dealer reviews fair and honest.

CarGurus users are invited to write reviews only after interacting with a dealership on the CarGurus platform. Each dealer review gets screened, and if we receive a review we can’t publish for some reason, we invite the submitter to edit and re-submit it.

CarGurus dealers are notified every time a shopper submits a review of their dealership. That notification includes an invitation to respond to the review publicly – which we encourage – or file a dispute with us if they believe a review to be fraudulent.

Conclusion

Don't overlook the power of customer reviews. Good and bad, they help set the tone for how your dealership is perceived by future customers. When used as an effective marketing tool, they'll help your dealership build trust, engage customers, and ultimately drive more sales. Make sure you're taking advantage!

To learn more about online reputation management and how to earn the Top-Rated Dealer Award, call us at 1-800-CARGURUS.



Reputation Management Checklist

Monitor your online reviews

- Do a Google search of your dealership's name
- Check the major review sites for reviews of your dealership
- Designate a review watchdog at your dealership
- Set up an email alert to get notifications for new reviews

Ask for and encourage online reviews

- Email customers after the sale requesting a review
- Hang signs around your dealership promoting the review sites you use
- Invite past customers to provide reviews on third-party sites like CarGurus

Respond to your reviews

- Show appreciation for positive reviews with a genuine thank you
- Don't over-explain or get defensive when responding to negative reviews—a simple response recognizing the issue and explaining your solution is enough
- When necessary, offer something to make up for the issue, like a free service

Integrate your reviews into your marketing strategy

- Showcase your best and most helpful reviews in email newsletters
- Include customers' quotes in print advertising
- Share your reviews on social media
- Link to your dealership's review page in your email signature