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Out of last year's inconvenience, service satisfaction rose

Dealer service satisfaction rose in a pandemic-plagued year

A funny thing happened in the pursuit of dealer service satisfaction last year.

In the midst of a pandemic that was legendary for the inconvenience it wrought, U.S. consumers said they were significantly more satisfied with their service shop experiences.

Chris Sutton, J.D. Power vice president of automotive retail, said he hopes the nation's auto dealers take note of that.

"Dealerships made the most out of a disruptively bad situation," Sutton said.

J.D. Power's 2021 U.S. Customer Service Index study, released last week, reported that consumers' overall satisfaction with dealer service visits rose 10 points from a year earlier — despite a year of operating challenges and disruptions that roiled the industry.

The improvement came as stay-at-home orders tapped the brakes on service-lane traffic last year.

But customers responded positively to new pandemic-era convenience services, such as vehicle pickup and drop-off.

The CSI score momentum is partly the result of the reduced volume in the service department during the pandemic, Sutton told Automotive News.

"It enabled service advisers to spend a bit more time with customers, gave technicians a little breathing room to conduct and inspect the work," Sutton said. "It shows that when dealerships manage their capacity, the customer gets a better experience out of it."

Dealers were indeed challenged during the pandemic, said Andrew Cutler, spokesman for Mini, which topped

the J.D. Power ranking this year among mass-market brands. "There was a general push by dealers to keep customers coming into the service department," Cutler said. "A lot of them rose to the occasion knowing that in the service side of their business, there's profit to be had."

Mini's rise in the 2021 ranking was a result in part of the brand's newly introduced Invisible Service program.

The technology platform allows dealership technicians to share videos with remote customers to show the need for recommended service work.

The average customer-pay value increased 38 percent with the use of technician videos, Mini said.

Brand rankings

Porsche reclaimed the lead from Lexus as the survey's luxury-segment winner, with an index score of 899 on a 1,000-point scale. Lexus, which scored 895, was trailed by Infiniti (887), Cadillac (883) and Lincoln (872).

While nearly all luxury brands saw an uptick in satisfaction scores this year, Hyundai Motor Co.'s Genesis brand accelerated fastest — up 30 points from its debut on the CSI list last year.

Alfa Romeo, which also made it onto the list for the first time last year, trailed the pack, rising 5 points with a score of 797.

Among mass-market brands, Mini scored 864 points — up 28 points from last year. The BMW-owned brand recovered from a poor performance the previous year when it tumbled 17 points to seventh place after being ranked in the

top three since 2015.

Buick fell to second place with 859 points, followed by Mitsubishi (857) and GMC (856).

The CSI study assesses customer satisfaction with service at franchised dealers or independent service facilities for maintenance or repair work in 1- to 3-year-old vehicles that are owned or leased.

Five factors

Five broad factors are measured: service quality, including total time and thoroughness; timeliness of the drop-off process and ease during service initiation; knowledge and courtesy of the service adviser; cleanliness of the service facility; and helpfulness of staff at vehicle pickup.

The study found online payment options also boosted satisfaction. While just 6 percent of premium-brand owners and 1 percent of mass-market owners said they used contactless payment options, pickup satisfaction is highest among those who did. Satisfaction scores improved 44 points among premium customers who paid remotely or online rather than handling payment via a cashier. Among mass-market customers, satisfaction improved 69 points.

"Customers are eager for anything that provides them more convenience," Sutton said. "Dealers have shown that they are able to pivot rapidly to meet the market."

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