THE DIGITAL INFLUENCE: HOW ONLINE RESEARCH PUTS AUTO SHOPPERS IN CONTROL
To answer that question, you have to ask another: What makes a consumer end up on the lot? And the answer to that requires understanding how your customers shop for cars, as well as where and when they’re most receptive to receiving your message.

It’s clear that more than ever, consumers are in control of the process—they’re curating all the available information down to the sources they deem to be the most influential on their purchasing decisions. It’s only when you understand how consumers shop for cars—the sources they consult, when they consult those sources and why they favor certain sources over others—that you can reach car shoppers at the right time and attract them to your dealership.
Compared with other consumer activities, shopping for a car used to be a discrete activity with its own defined set of steps that consumers took in the process. Today, consumers shop for a car the way they shop for a TV, refrigerator or anything that requires a certain amount of consideration. That’s because the Internet, mobile technology and social media have made the same set of tools available to help educate consumers regardless of the product they’re buying.

Nonetheless, many auto marketers have clung to old notions of the car shopping journey. That is, a linear process in which consumers start with a wide consideration set, gradually eliminating vehicles from consideration until they narrow their choices down to the single correct fit at the end. In reality, consumers take a much less linear path from consideration to purchase.

Car shopping is a dynamic process in which shoppers sift through the available options, adding and eliminating cars as they go. That’s because today’s consumers are willing to commit the time and effort required to make informed purchasing decisions.
DEGREES OF INFLUENCE

Consumers are in control not only of what information they gather to make a purchase, but also the where, when and how. While shoppers use a mix of both online and offline sources, it’s crucial to keep in mind that not all sources are created equally. During the average car shopping experience, consumers are bombarded with push messages from manufacturers, regional marketing associations and local dealers, but they seek the information they want on their terms.

To better understand which inputs were influencing vehicle consideration, shoppers were asked about 24 different sources they may have encountered on the path to purchase and the influence of each.

C+R Research, Digital Influence in Automotive 2014

Note that each source can account for numerous individual “resources” (e.g., various websites, different magazines, alternative forms of social media, etc.)
INFLUENCE OF INFORMATION SOURCES IS NOT EQUAL

While all of these sources have a certain degree of influence, consumers did not use them equally. Consumers have trained themselves to curate information and educate themselves before making all types of purchases, and shopping for a car is no different. The majority of consumers won’t visit a dealership without first conducting a significant amount of research, and they won’t take one source as gospel.

On average, shoppers are influenced by six to seven different information sources but rely on just one or two resources as their main, go-to sources. They place the greatest weight on sources that they consider the most influential, helpful and trustworthy.

SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

THERE ARE MANY SOURCES OF INFORMATION

ON AVERAGE SHOPPERS ARE INFLUENCED BY 6-7 DIFFERENT SOURCES

MOST SHOPPERS USE ONLY 1 OR 2 RESOURCES AS THEIR MAIN, GO-TO INFO SOURCES
DIGITAL RESOURCES ARE KEY TO BUILDING CONSIDERATION

It’s clear that digital sources have a big impact on vehicle consideration. The information provided from independent research sites, manufacturer websites, dealer websites and review sites give shoppers the information they want, when they want it, without having to visit a dealership to do their homework.

- Most shoppers are influenced by at least three online sources.
- Two-thirds of consumers refer to an online source as one of their go-to resources.

These digital resources play complementary but distinct roles in the consumer research ecosystem, and shoppers decide what role each site plays for them. This makes it essential for auto marketers to maintain a consistent presence across these channels to build shoppers’ confidence as they encounter various bits of information across platforms at various stages of their online research.

While it’s clear all of these digital sources play a role in decision making, independent research sites top the list of influence and were the most-cited source of influence online or offline. Even more noteworthy, in-market shoppers and recent purchasers report independent research sites as their top go-to and primary resource online.

TOP ONLINE SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

- **INDEPENDENT RESEARCH SITES**
  - 50%
- **SEARCH ENGINES**
  - 49%
- **MANUFACTURER WEBSITES**
  - 46%
- **AUTOMOTIVE DEALERSHIP WEBSITES**
  - 42%

C+R Research, Digital Influence in Automotive 2014
INDEPENDENT RESEARCH SITES ARE LEADING GO-TO SOURCE FOR SHOPPERS

This is a particularly important consideration because many auto marketers believe that by beefing up their own websites, they can bypass the influence of independent research sites and attract consumers directly. However, doing so only removes a marketer’s presence from a source on which consumers place a high value.

Furthermore, it assumes that once you’ve driven traffic to your site that you’ve earned a customer. The fact is that consumers continue to rely on independent digital sources throughout the entire the shopping journey.
OFFLINE INPUTS ARE ALSO KEY TO PURCHASE CONSIDERATION

Offline sources also play an important role in the shopping process. But it’s worth examining the types of offline sources that consumers rely upon most:

- **TALKING TO FRIENDS**
- **DEALERSHIP VISITS**
- **NOTICING A VEHICLE ON THE STREET**

What’s noteworthy is that all three of the top offline sources are experience based. For such a large purchase, it is only natural that shoppers will want to see, touch and experience a vehicle prior to making a decision. So while recent industry studies show that shoppers today may make fewer dealer visits than they used to, the dealer visit is still an essential source of information on the path to purchase, and shoppers are very much still in consideration mode during the dealer visit.

The fact that traditional advertising does not rank among the top offline sources is indicative of shoppers’ desire for control over the information they receive—something that offline advertising does not afford. It is also directly correlated with trust. While shoppers may be receptive to an advertising message, they are inherently skeptical and will research any claims made in an ad on their terms.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Independent research sites, search engines and OEM and dealer websites form a digital ecosystem that supply shoppers with various pieces of the information puzzle to shape their final purchase decisions. Ultimately, however, shoppers decide the role each of these sources play.

It’s important for national and local retailers to have a strong branded web presence. But given consumers’ desire for trusted, independent advice, dealers can’t rely on their own channels alone. Today’s consumers are educating themselves on independent research sites, and that’s a key point of influence that dealerships need to target.

Nonetheless, while just about every consumer uses digital media to some degree during the shopping process, dealerships continue to focus most of their advertising budgets on traditional media outlets.
WHEN MATTERS AS MUCH AS WHERE

Just as restaurants cater to customers when they’re ready to eat, auto marketers need to target car shoppers when they’re ready to buy. That’s why it’s important to note that online sources are more influential earlier in the shopping process while offline sources, such as visiting the dealership, become more important later in the process. And when it comes to go-to resources, in-market shoppers tend to focus more on online sources than purchasers, proving online to be a critical channel to capture buyers when they are in the consideration stage.

One reason consumers value independent research sites during the early stages of the buying process is that they offer side-by-side comparisons of vehicles and dealerships. Such sites feature inventories of millions of vehicles from thousands of dealerships, helping consumers build confidence early in the shopping process.

IMPLICATIONS

Independent research sites reach shoppers when they’re hungry. To be on the shortlist and earn an in-store visit, online media is an essential platform to earn a spot in a shopper’s consideration set.
Some shoppers rely on more information sources than others. For example, new car shoppers tend to use more sources, perhaps given the investment and options available. On the other end of the spectrum, those who have an immediate need to buy because they are out a vehicle consult the least number of sources.

But auto marketers should not be overwhelmed by the plethora of media options. Because today’s shoppers are inundated with messages from various media channels, they’ve had to become masters of seeking and processing the information most useful to them. And it’s clear that consumers demand information that they can trust. Go-to sources are the ones consumers consider both helpful and trustworthy.

**SHoppers turn most to sources that are both helpful and trustworthy**

C+R Research, Digital Influence in Automotive 2014
HELPFUL VS. TRUSTWORTHY

There’s an important distinction between helpful and trustworthy. Shoppers consider dealership sites helpful, for example, but they don’t find the information provided to be completely trustworthy. Independent research sites, on the other hand, ranked high in both helpfulness and trustworthiness. That’s in part because consumers crave unbiased information on vehicles and dealerships to help them feel confident that they’re making a sound decision.

In fact, when it comes to trust, shoppers find independent research sites to be among the most trustworthy of all sources, second only to their own previous experience with a vehicle and even more trustworthy than friends and family.

IMPLICATIONS

While shoppers are influenced by a wide range of sources, advertisers don’t need to treat them all with equal weight. Go-to sources that shoppers find both helpful and trustworthy prove effective channels for building consideration and should be a foundation of automotive marketing plans.
THE DEALERSHIP VISIT

Not surprisingly, the dealer visit still ranks highly as a resource for auto shoppers. While consumers can find more information than ever online, nothing replaces the tactile experience of seeing, touching and test-driving a car, all of which helps tap into the emotional aspect of making such a significant purchase. But one of the challenges for dealers is that there’s so little they have control over before a shopper makes the decision to visit the dealership.

Consumers used to rely heavily on the dealer visit to learn more about a particular car. Now, with online sources and mobile devices placing so much information at their fingertips, consumers feel educated and confident before they ever set foot in a dealership. The result is that shoppers are visiting fewer dealerships, and those visits are overwhelmingly driven by online influences.

• **1 IN 5 SHOPPERS VISIT JUST ONE SHOWROOM**

• **1 IN 4 VISIT ONLY TWO**

68% rely on online sources to find a dealership

C+R Research, Digital Influence in Automotive 2014
TRUST DELIVERS FOOT TRAFFIC

With consumers visiting fewer and fewer dealerships, it’s crucial to get your message out to consumers where they will be most receptive. Increasingly, that’s online.

For example, 68 percent of all in-market shoppers and recent purchasers rely on online sources to find a dealership. By comparison, only 9 percent used outdoor ads and only 8 percent cited radio advertisements.

SHOPPERS COMMUNICATE ON THEIR TERMS

And along with visiting fewer dealerships, half of consumers don’t believe there is value in contacting a dealer prior to a visit, with most citing that it’s unnecessary. Furthermore, one in five in-market shoppers says they would never contact a dealer prior to a visit, though the sentiment is lower among purchasers, indicating that it may become more important in the later stages of the purchase process.

Just as consumers are in control over how they receive messages about vehicles and dealerships, shoppers also want to communicate on their terms. That’s why it’s crucial to align your process to communicate with shoppers the way they want to have a dialogue. That includes training staff to manage shoppers’ preferred channels effectively with a goal of working toward in-store visit. It also means that you can’t force your desired behavior upon shoppers on your platforms. Instead, provide a variety of communications channels that align with their needs.

Among shoppers who do contact a dealer prior to visit, for example, phone and email were the preferred communication methods, suggesting that shoppers are comfortable with tools that are convenient and can provide them with immediate answers. Also, among purchasers, texting was in line with online chat as a preferred communication channel, indicating that it is growing in importance and is an area dealers should build their processes around as customers begin to adopt new communication tools.

Also, don’t assume all activity can be measured. Because more than half of shoppers will never contact a dealership, attribution models need to account for walk-in visits that don’t drive an online conversion.
THE DIGITAL JOURNEY CONTINUES ON THE LOT

Finally, don’t assume the retailer is in control of the process once a shopper arrives on the lot. While highly influential and used as a go-to source, dealerships lack the trust factor of other sources. That’s why shoppers are turning to their mobile devices even while they’re looking at cars on the showroom floor:

• **ACCORDING TO A RECENT CARS.COM AND PLACED INC. STUDY, 63 PERCENT OF SHOPPERS REPORT USING THEIR MOBILE DEVICE AT THE DEALERSHIP.**

• **INDEPENDENT RESEARCH SITES ARE CONSUMERS’ MOST-USED SOURCE OF INFORMATION ON THE LOT.**

These shoppers are using mobile devices to research prices, read vehicle or dealer reviews, and find nearby dealerships. Given that customers who visit dealerships are near the end of the buying process, they’re using mobile devices to reinforce their decisions with unbiased, third-party information.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Consumers don’t visit the lot to be educated about the car; they’ve already educated themselves long before they arrive at your door. They come for the tactile experience, and for the gut-level validation that they’re purchasing the right car.

Dealers also have to be prepared for the shopper walking on to the lot knowing at least as much as your sales staff, if not more. This means retailers with a reputation for excellent customer service will benefit the most from the new breed of mobile shoppers. Because those consumers are researching your dealership—and comparing you to local competitors—while they’re on your lot, a strong presence on independent research sites provides dealers with an opportunity to compete on more than price.

Dealers have historically placed great value on leads. But given that only half of shoppers will make contact before visiting a dealership, leads are no longer the primary measure of your marketing budget’s ROI. Because shoppers who visit independent research sites are more likely to visit more dealerships—and to contact dealers before making a visit—dealers would be better served by making sure they’re reaching in-market shoppers where they’re gathering the information they demand.

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1 Placed Inc., January 2014
One thing is clear: **Auto marketers cannot bypass the consumer journey and expect to attract and retain customers.**

But despite the fact that consumer behavior has changed dramatically, too many marketers are trying to reach consumers the way they did 20 or 30 years ago.

In a world where consumers are in control of the messages they receive, auto marketers must align their strategies to the way their customers shop for cars. Given the multiple touch points that influence the car buying decision, there’s no silver bullet. But focusing on the sources that are the most influential and trustworthy means you’re reaching shoppers who are active, intent and engaged in finding their next car. Consumers’ go-to sources, such as independent research sites, help consumers start the car-buying journey and validate their decisions later in the process.

The auto marketers that ignore these key sources risk missing out on an opportunity to communicate with consumers at the right place and the right time.
This report is based on a survey conducted independently by C+R Research that examined the key information sources car shoppers consult during the decision-making process. Through a 15-minute online survey conducted between April 30, 2014, and May 9, 2014, C+R collected the responses of 1,005 participants—500 of whom were categorized as in-market shoppers and 505 defined as purchasers. The participants included a mix of shoppers and buyers of new and used cars. C+R conducted significance testing using a 95 percent confidence interval.

To ensure the results were representative nationally, the incoming sample was balanced by age, gender, ethnicity and region. To participate in this study, respondents were required to be:

- **ADULTS AGED 21-60**
- **CURRENTLY PLANNING TO PURCHASE A CAR WITHIN THE NEXT SIX MONTHS AND ARE READY TO PURCHASE, OR HAVE PURCHASED A CAR WITHIN THE PAST SIX MONTHS**
- **RESPONSIBLE FULLY OR IN PART FOR THE VEHICLE PURCHASE DECISION MAKING PROCESS**
ABOUT CARS.COM

Cars.com is a leading independent research site for car shoppers that offers credible and easy-to-understand information from consumers and experts to provide buyers with greater control over the shopping process. The website allows shoppers to search, compare and connect with sellers and dealers all over the country. Leveraging its growing audience of approximately 12 million unique visitors per month, Cars.com provides digital marketing solutions to dealers, manufacturers and other organizations looking to position themselves in front of captive, in-market car shoppers. For more information, visit www.dealers.cars.com.

ABOUT C+R RESEARCH

C+R Research is a consumer and market insights firm. For more than 50 years, the company has provided its clients with insights on the thinking behind consumer behavior in a variety of industries, including consumer packaged goods, financial services and retail.

The 2013 Market Research Supplier Satisfaction Survey ranked C+R as the No. 1 full-service market research supplier in the U.S.
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