

The Execution Gap:

2026 Widewail/Automotive News Customer Experience Study

widewail

Automotive News contentstudio

The Execution Gap:
in customer experience

Dealers are investing in customer experience, yet communication and follow-through remain persistent problems. This study examines where those efforts fall short, how dealers and OEMs view the problem and what dealerships can do to deliver a more consistent experience.

92%

Customer experience is a financial priority

92% of surveyed dealers say customer experience is extremely or very important to their financial performance.

48%

Communication remains a common frustration

48% of dealers identify poor communication and follow-through as the most common source of customer frustration at their stores. Separately, communication appears in 44% of negative reviews in Widewail's analysis.

83%

Dealers report quick detection while OEMs question follow-through

83% of dealers say they identify shifts in customer sentiment within a week. Only 21% of OEM respondents rate dealers as extremely or very effective at turning feedback into operational changes.

+$170

Clear communication is associated with higher service revenue

In Widewail's analysis of 360 dealerships, top-quartile performers on its communication measure averaged $170 more per repair order than dealerships with typical scores.

THREE QUESTIONS THIS STUDY ANSWERS

1. Where are dealers focusing customer experience investment, and where do problems persist?
2. How do dealers and OEMs assess the response to customer feedback?
3. What changes to dealership processes and staff coaching could make the experience more consistent?

ABOUT THE STUDY

This report combines an Automotive News/Widewail survey of dealer and OEM respondents, separate Widewail analyses of customer reviews and service revenue and interviews with dealership and Widewail executives. The number of survey respondents varies by question and appears with each chart.

WITH INSIGHTS FROM



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Most dealership customers share good experiences in positive reviews. Some 91% of the over 20 million reviews on the Widewail platform describe positive experiences. Dealers and customers agree the challenge is consistency. Both say dealers struggle to deliver a good experience and good communication every time.

Dealers know what's at stake. New research from Automotive News, in partnership with Widewail, found that 92% of surveyed dealers said customer experience is extremely or very important to their financial performance. They're spending accordingly. Nearly two-thirds said service experience and convenience get the most investment or attention, and more than half also named communication quality and follow-through as key investment areas.

Still, 48% of dealers said poor communication and follow-through are the most common source of customer frustration at their stores. Customers say the same thing. Communication is their top complaint, cited in 44% of negative reviews in Widewail's analysis. Dealers ranked communicating with customers during the service process as the hardest challenge in the service department, and consistency across employees as their hardest staff challenge in both sales and service.

Dealers have more ways to communicate than ever, including texting, live chat, call centers, video and AI tools. They also get more feedback in CSI reports, online reviews, social posts, and comments to staff and the BDC. "What's changed are the tools and the customer expectations. Everybody now expects an immediate response, and that's often challenging for a dealership team," said Brad Bowers, a former dealership and OEM executive who is now national sales director for Widewail, a leading customer intelligence company.

Dealers are investing in customer experience, but their priorities and confidence don't always match what customers and OEMs expect. Closing that gap means using customer feedback to find what needs fixing, build processes that hold up across every employee, benchmark against other stores, and track whether it's working.

Widewail's analysis of 2026 customer reviews reports that customers rate dealership staff as more honest, knowledgeable and caring than in 2025 reviews.

"But as the individual steps have gotten stronger this year, the process surrounding them—the communication, the follow-up, and the handoffs from one person to the next—has not kept pace," said Widewail CEO Cuyler Owens. "The friction customers describe in 2026 reviews is less about the repair or the deal and more about drop-off and pickup, the time between the desk and finance, and communication between the sales floor and the service drive. These are process gaps."

The Automotive News/Widewail survey also encompassed insights from OEM executives, who echoed the consistency and process problem. OEM respondents specifically identified a signal-to-action gap: While 83% of dealers say they identify customer sentiment shifts and problems within a week, 40% of OEM respondents say dealerships are ineffective at converting that feedback into operational changes. Only 21% of OEM executives said dealers are extremely or very effective in making those changes.

This represents a substantial perception gap between OEMs and their dealers. More than 60% of respondents said dealers and OEMs are "somewhat aligned" on what matters most to customers; another 24% said, "not very aligned." Bowers said a dealer may respond quickly to an individual review but might not use that feedback to implement broader changes across the dealership.



INVESTMENT + ATTENTION

Service leads current investment and attention

SURVEY QUESTION

Rank the following based on how important you believe each factor is to delivering a strong customer experience at a dealership. (Place the most important at the top.)

Service experience and convenience lead current investment and attention (64%), followed by communication (53%). Over the next 24 months, 60% expect an increase in service experience investment or attention, while 56% expect an increase in communication.

WHAT THE CHART MEASURES

Current areas of customer experience investment or attention, and areas where respondents expect an increase over the next 24 months.

Area	Current focus	Expect increase
Service experience and convenience	**64%**	**60%**
Communication quality and follow-through	**53%**	**56%**
Staff training and performance	**31%**	**41%**
Transparency, fees and trust	**15%**	**33%**

Source: Automotive News/Widewail dealer survey; n=100

Closing this execution gap has clear financial implications. Widewail's research on dealer management systems and customer feedback data from 360 dealerships finds that consistent communication correlates with higher revenue per RO. Dealers in the top quartile of communication consistency average $170 more per RO compared to dealerships with typical communication scores.

Widewail analyzed its customer review database to determine which brands car shoppers said were the most consistently good communicators at the dealership level. Luxury nameplates topped the list: BMW, Lexus, Mercedes-Benz, Land Rover and Audi. Brands like Land Rover and Porsche stand out for having the highest average communication positivity, but they also show a wide range of outcomes between top- and bottom-performing dealers within their networks. In contrast, Toyota's performance lands right on the industry median, but its network range of outcomes is tighter.

The brands with the least consistent communication at the dealership level include those facing recent or ongoing financial and operational challenges, like Mitsubishi, Nissan and the CDJR brands.

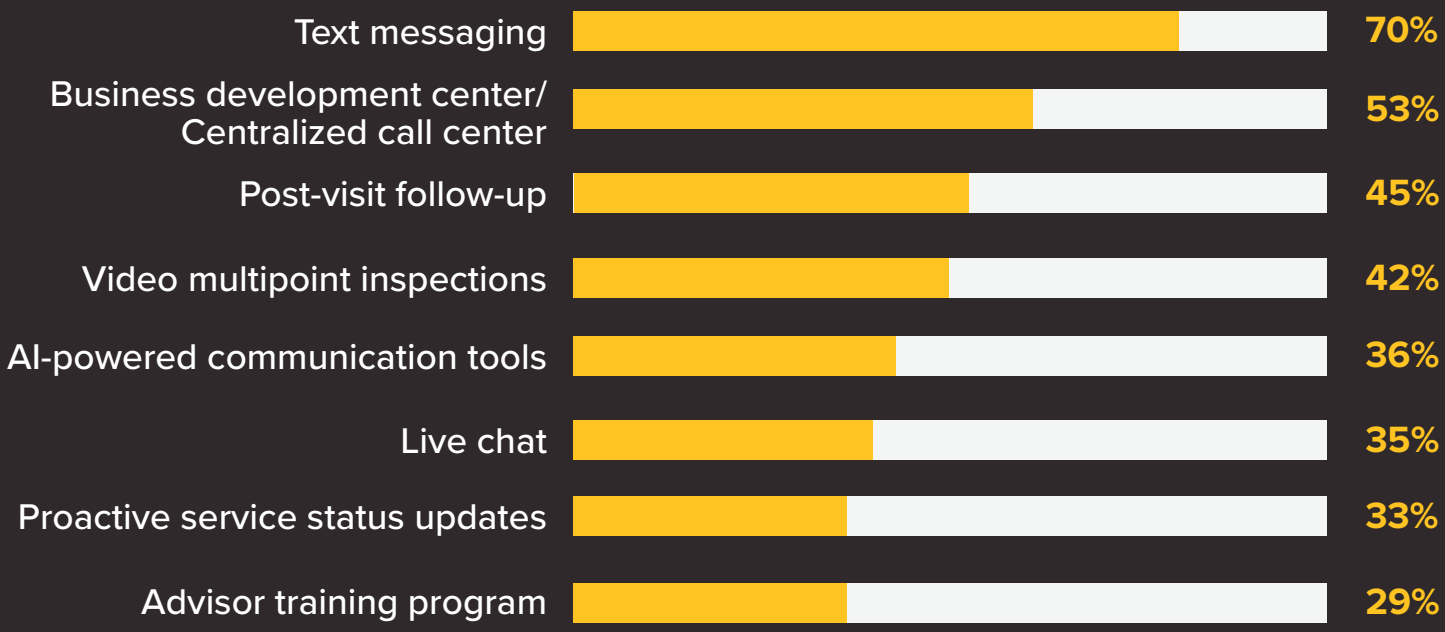
"The brands that are always front runners in our data are ones where the dealer and OEM relationship is strong," Widewail COO Melissa Terrell said. "When you have that tight relationship, and you have intentionality, and you have a consistent focus from the OEM down to the dealer, you see great results."

COMMUNICATION

More channels, same consistency problem

Dealers have deployed a broad mix of communication channels, but adoption is uneven and consistent execution remains the central challenge.

Texting leads the communication tools dealers use



Source: Automotive News/Widewail dealer survey; n=123

SURVEY QUESTION

Which communication methods or practices are currently in use at your dealership/group? Select all that apply.

Text messaging is the most widely used capability in the survey (70%), followed by a business development center or centralized call center (53%). Dealers also report using follow-up, video inspections, AI and live chat. The survey identifies which tools are available; it does not establish how consistently employees use them.

WHAT THE CHART MEASURES

Communication capabilities currently in use. Respondents could select all that apply.

COMMUNICATION

More channels, same consistency problem

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SURVEY QUESTION

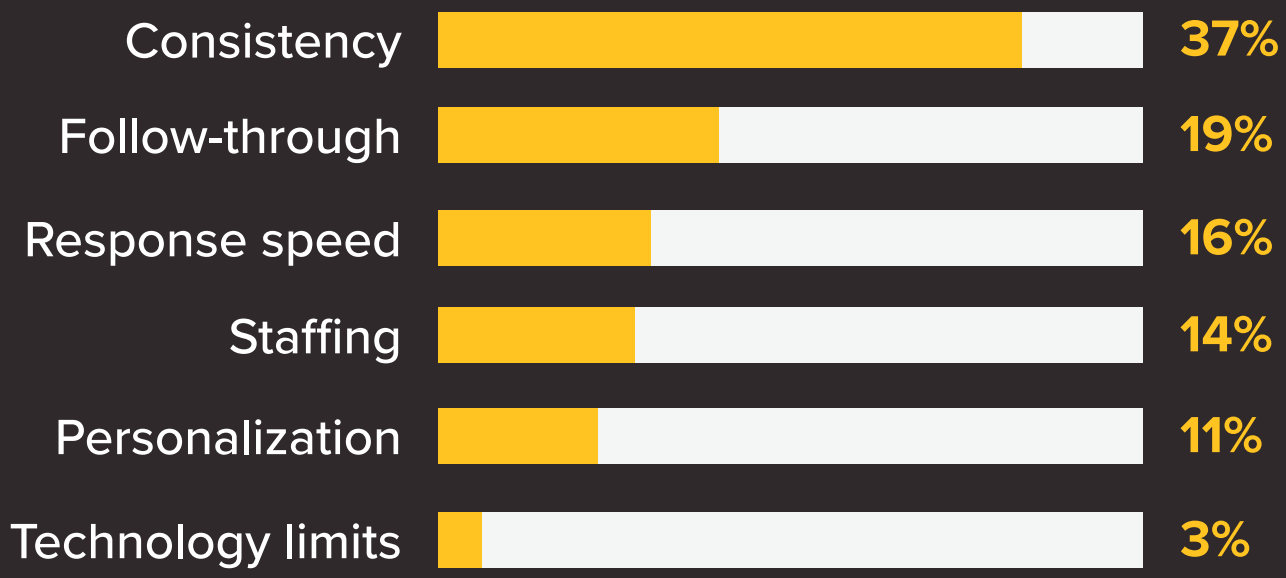
Which of the following areas are currently receiving the greatest customer experience investment or attention at your dealership or dealership group?

Consistency leads at 37%, ahead of follow-through (19%) and response speed (16%). A useful response is to set clear expectations for when and how employees update customers, including during handoffs between departments.

WHAT THE CHART MEASURES

Dealers' hardest communication challenge.

Consistency is the most frequently selected communication challenge



Source: Automotive News/Widewail dealer survey; n=114

Communication appears in

44%

of negative customer reviews in Widewail's analysis.

Source: Automotive News/Widewail dealer survey; n=114

How can dealers address their consistency and communications problems, align their efforts more closely with OEM priorities and strengthen both the dealer and OEM brand? Widewail clients and industry experts offered a few tangible ideas.

Standardize how customer satisfaction is measured: Owens described the disconnect between dealer and OEM views as "notable and alarming." He believes a key problem is a lack of shared priorities about the customer experience. For instance, each OEM—even different brands within corporations—often uses different measurements and scorecards for customer experience. "If you could map out data across a more standardized set of customer evaluations—at least across each OEM's brand family—that would help standardize the way dealers and OEMs talk about the same information, the same feedback, the same trends," Owens said. Terrell said that standardization can then flow down to floor staff: "It's important to focus on creating that consistent framework so everyone is singing off the same sheet of music," she said. "It's not easy; it takes intention, but then people realize, wow, yeah, I know what's being watched. As an employee, I know what's important, and I know where to invest my time."

Shorten the time to insight with public reviews: Feedback is only useful if it arrives while there's still time to act on it. Survey results take weeks to reach the store; by then, the customer has moved on, the employee may not remember the transaction, and the same issue may have repeated. Feedback channels like reviews, with time-to-insight measured in days, not weeks, give dealers the fingertip feel to coach on patterns while they are relevant. That lets managers spot a problem while it's still small, follow up with an unhappy customer while the relationship can still be saved, and confirm whether a process change actually worked.

Take a page from the best retailers: "More and more I hear from dealers how they're not just comparing themselves to the dealer down the street or a dealer in their network," said Terrell. "They're comparing themselves to Ritz-Carlton. They're comparing themselves to Amazon. That's just a huge signal that they're going outside the norm to try and bring in consistently wonderful experiences for their customers." For instance, to deliver a customer experience that rivals premier retail operations, Ohio-based Ricart Automotive provides ongoing employee training led by hospitality veterans from hotels and restaurants. "We really try to teach our staff what it means to make a guest feel cared for and valued," said Regan Reilly, VP-Chief Marketing Officer. "It's hard to get it right, and it takes a lot of intention, but once you crack that, it's magic."

> *"But as the individual steps have gotten stronger this year, the process surrounding them—the communication, the follow-up, and the handoffs from one person to the next—has not kept pace,"*
>
> **— CUYLER OWENS | CEO, WIDEWAIL**



DEALER + OEM COMPARISON

The signal-to-action gap

Dealers say they see change quickly. OEM respondents are far less convinced that insight becomes action.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

When customer sentiment or satisfaction shifts at your dealership, how quickly can your team typically identify it? (Dealer)

Which communication challenge remains hardest to solve? (OEM)

Most dealers say they recognize a shift in customer sentiment within a week: 45% within a day and another 38% within a week. In a separate question, just 21% of OEM respondents rate dealers as extremely or very effective at turning feedback into operational changes; 40% rate them as ineffective.

DEALER CHART MEASURES

Dealers' hardest communication challenge.

OEM CHART MEASURES

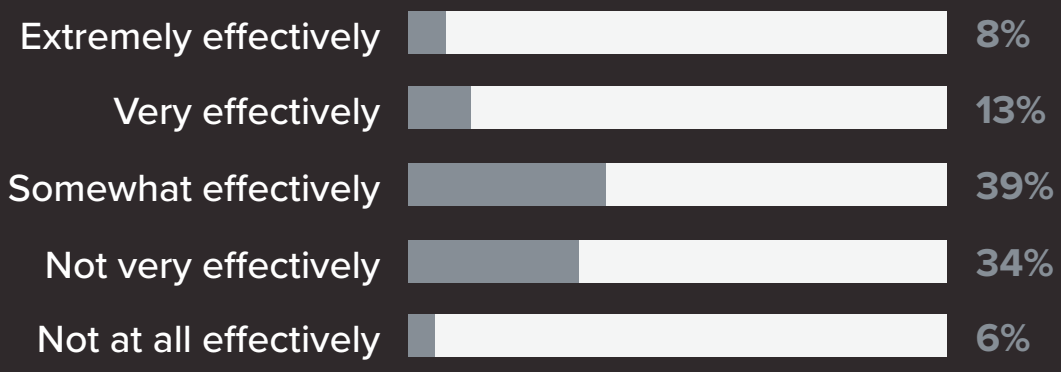
OEM respondents' assessment of dealers' effectiveness at turning feedback into operational changes.

How quickly dealer teams identify a sentiment shift



Automotive News/Widewail dealer survey; n=121.

OEM view: how effectively dealers turn feedback into change

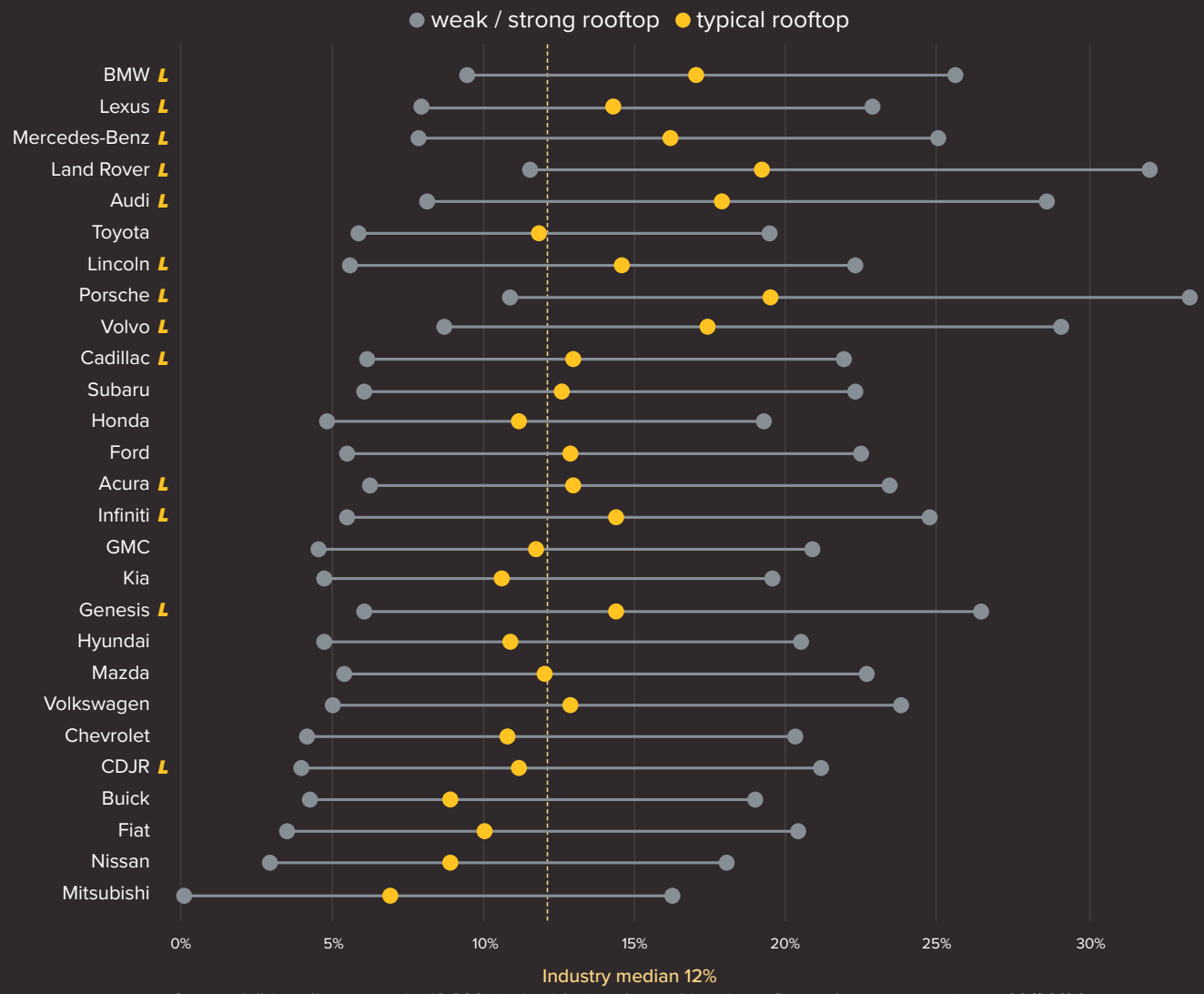


Automotive News/Widewail OEM survey; n=62.

Communication consistency by brand

Each bar spans a brand's weakest 10% of rooftops to its strongest 10%.

Customer praise for communication varies within every brand



Source: Widewail scorecards; 13,893 dealership locations with at least five reviews per month as of 8/30/26

THE WIDEWAIL COMMUNICATION CONSISTENCY INDEX

A brand-level measurement of communication consistency and quality based on customer feedback in public reviews

This chart shows how often customers praise communication in reviews and how that measure varies among dealerships within each brand. Several luxury brands have relatively high typical scores, but results vary substantially across their networks. A strong brand-level result can conceal very different experiences from one dealership to another.

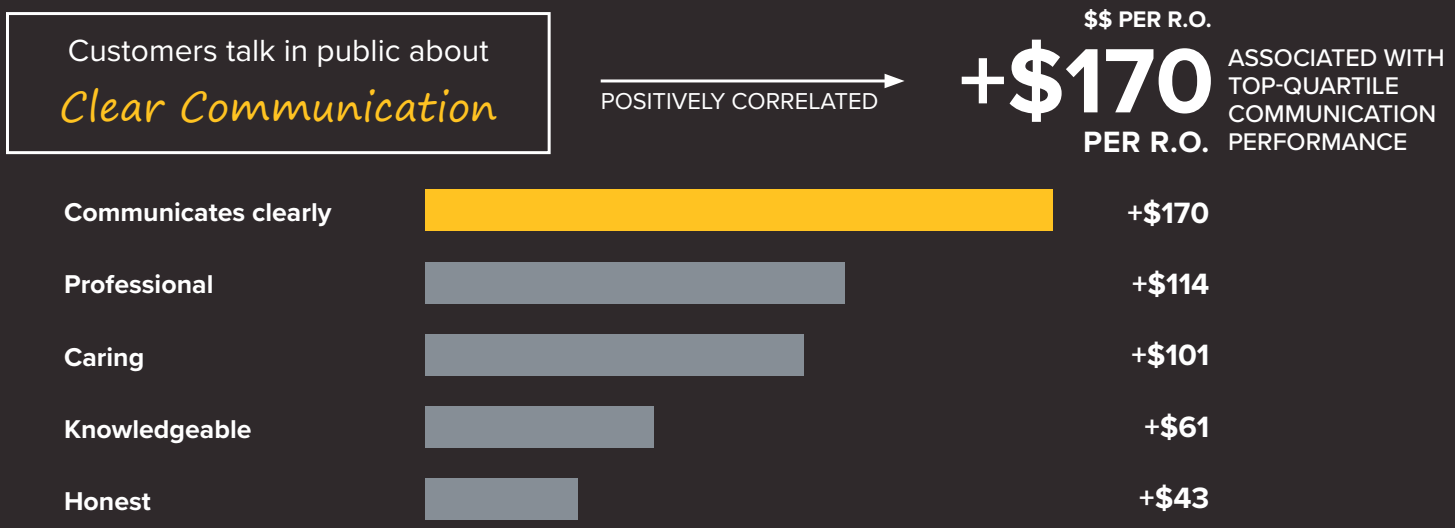
HOW TO READ THE CHART

Each line spans a brand's weaker to stronger dealerships; the dot marks its typical dealership. Farther right means a higher share of reviews praising communication. A wider span means greater variation within the brand. The vertical reference line marks the 12% industry benchmark.

Think customer first: "It sounds simple, but slow down and listen to what the customer's needs are," said Joshua Hoffman, director of digital strategy and business development for the Hoffman Auto Group. His company maintains a 15-person client care center to manage appointments and customer concerns for its 12 dealerships and two collision centers. Executives become mystery shoppers to see their company from a customer's perspective. And although Hoffman invests in its facilities with an eye toward its customers—including a recent $18 million upgrade to its Porsche dealership—its team knows that small things matter.

"Sometimes it's just taking the time to text a customer to tell them that you know they're waiting, but you don't have an update. That matters," Hoffman said. Bowers agrees. "The dealer body in general has had a tendency to look at what's easier for them as opposed to what's easier for the customer," he said.

Stronger communication scores are associated with higher revenue per repair order



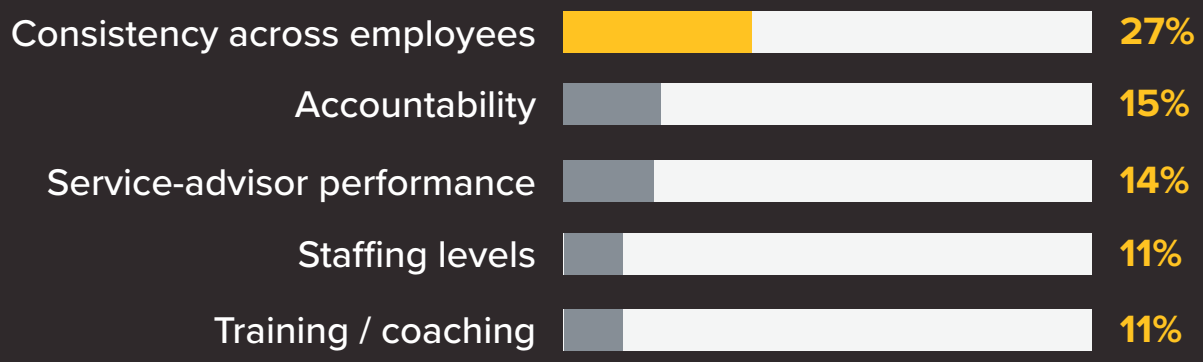
Widewail analysis of customer feedback and dealer management system data from 360 dealerships.
Measurement Period: February - June 2026

THE WIDEWAIL COMMUNICATION CONSISTENCY INDEX

A brand-level measurement of communication consistency and quality based on customer feedback in public reviews

In Widewail's analysis of customer feedback and dealer management system data from 360 dealerships, top-quartile performers on its communication measure averaged $170 more per repair order than dealerships with typical scores. The finding links communication performance with service revenue; it does not establish that communication alone caused the difference.

Consistent performance across employees is a leading staff challenge



Automotive News/Widewail dealer survey; n=103.

SURVEY QUESTION

Which staff-related customer experience challenge remains hardest to solve?

Consistency across employees is the most frequently selected response shown (27%), followed by accountability (15%) and service-advisor performance (14%). These findings support a focus on shared standards and coaching tied to the specific problems customers describe.

WHAT THE CHART MEASURES

Dealers' hardest staff challenge.

> *"When you communicate better, you are going to build trust. And when you build trust, the customer is going to come back to you for service, and eventually for a new vehicle."*
>
> **— BRAD BOWERS | NATIONAL SALES DIRECTOR, WIDEWAIL**

Create and enforce a standardized work process: It's a familiar discussion, but dealers still too often operate in a free-wheeling environment. "Everybody uses their best judgment—and everybody's best judgment is a little bit different," Owens said. "Standard operating procedures, a really consistent process, is what we see from dealers at the top quartile of reviews. Those customers say the same thing in their reviews over and over and over again: This is the process, this is what they did. I knew everything that was going on."

One dealer in the Automotive News/Widewail survey said a key opportunity is "creating consistent processes that focus on the overall customer experience and expectations. This would include compensation packages for their employees that focus on customer feedback along with sales performance."

Eliminate the friction of unnecessary handoffs: Owens thinks customer handoffs from sales to F&I or within the service lane are often where a customer's communication problems occur. To reduce that friction, some dealers are turning to a concierge model, where a customer entering the showroom or service department has a single point of contact during the transaction—sometimes including F&I.

Use customer feedback for targeted training and improvements: Today's technology, including verbatim customer reviews from Widewail, allows customer feedback correlated to specific staff and events. Cuyler said dealers can use that data for pinpointed training that goes beyond generalized messages. "Each employee should be trained on what they personally need to work on. Not vanilla, one-size-fits-all training," he said.

"One of the things we see is that often there are a few low-performing staff members at every dealership who are dragging down performance. If you can fix that—if you can coach those employees and get them to a better point—you're going to save money by hanging onto employees, and see overall expectations rise. That's how you build great teams."

Remember that it's not just a one-time transaction: "The challenge has always been to not focus on the average RO dollars today. Let's focus on what's going to bring customers back in six months, then next year, then three years from now, when they're in the market to buy a new car again," Bowers said. A recent Cox Automotive study estimates that losing a dealership service customer costs $12,398 in potential lifetime service spend over the vehicle ownership period. "When you communicate better, you are going to build trust. And when you build trust, the customer is going to come back to you for service, and eventually for a new vehicle."

One dealer respondent to the Automotive News survey summed it up: "Over the next three years, the dealerships that win will reduce uncertainty throughout the ownership journey. Customers should be able to easily explain their concerns before the visit, receive real-time repair updates, understand recommendations with photos and videos, approve work digitally, and receive personalized follow-up after the repair. The challenge is connecting customer communication, service operations, and vehicle data into one seamless experience. Dealerships that eliminate the need for customers to repeat themselves and proactively communicate throughout the repair process will improve trust, retention, CSI, and profitability simultaneously. In short: the future competitive advantage isn't selling cars—it's delivering a service experience where customers feel heard, informed, and remembered."

Terrell, a veteran of customer service measurement in the retail industry, agreed that dealers who invest in creating a great and consistent customer experience will reap the rewards. She pointed to 2026 research showing that companies with high customer satisfaction also tend to do very well in the stock market. Widewail's own analysis shows that for the top 25% of dealers—those whose staff are praised in customer reviews for good communication—that can translate into as much as 29% more revenue per repair order than typical dealers.

"There is no doubt in my mind that investment in customer experience delivers a return. That investment will create a durable business, longevity and sustained profitability in a world where loyalty is harder to earn," she said. "There is nothing more important."

CLOSING TAKEAWAYS

Five ways to make the experience more consistent

- **Set clear standards for communication across sales, F&I and service. Define what a good customer update includes and align dealer and OEM measures where possible.**
- **Give each handoff an owner. Make clear who updates the customer, when the update is due and what happens next.**
- **Use recurring feedback to identify a specific process to improve. After making the change, check whether the same problem returns.**
- **Coach employees on the actual issues customers describe. Use that feedback to make training specific and reinforce the behaviors customers value.**
- **Keep customers informed even when there is no new answer. Acknowledge delays and explain the next step, as Hoffman Auto Group describes in its interview.**
- **Recognizing a problem needs to lead to a specific change. Assign someone to make that change and check whether the same complaints recur.**