AUTOMOTIVE

# Creating smarter ad experiences in auto marketing

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*Rachel Conforti*

By Rachel Conforti

A long-time city dweller, I never needed to drive. However, like many others during the pandemic, I found myself looking to invest in a car and was surprised by the digital automotive shopping experience.

As a seasoned digital marketer, I thought we, as an industry, could do better. Here is the good, the bad and the ugly, and how I recommend we move forward.

Love at first search

Once I knew I wanted a car, I thought a good place to start would be to rely on the power of the Internet to bring me relevant information.

I crowdsourced on Facebook and immediately got a slew of recommendations from my network on which cars to research. Little did I know that people love their car second only to their first-born child and their spouse maybe. Once I had typed a number of search queries with terms such as Subaru SUV, Mazda CX-5 and Volvo XC60, I was immediately served with beautiful ads, deal terms and click-bait to test drive.

I took this process one step further and signed up on various car dealership Web sites to take a test drive, knowing that in some instances I would be on their email list long after my purchase was complete, but that it would likely get me closer to speaking with someone via call or a text.

No shopping needed

I leaned back and let the ads fly in, which allowed me to enjoy all the benefits from data, cookies and targeting.

After I signed up for a few test drives, I thought I would be able to walk into the dealerships and learn about what I could get and which car would best suit my needs.

However, as a first-time car buyer, I was not prepared at my first test drive to answer any of the questions that the dealership salesperson was asking me: What did I know about "trim levels" and what features were most important to me?

I just wanted to have a vehicle to drive for weekend getaways with my four-year-old son so, safety, leg room and good trunk space would be a requirement and I also needed the car for my commute, as I no longer wanted to use

public transport for the foreseeable future.

While I was able to navigate the car dealer sites to customize a car, I had no clue that dealers did not "sell" you anything anymore, but rather the customer does their own research before they walk into the dealership. What other businesses can say that?

I was immediately impressed and obsessed with the auto buyer journey from discovery to interest to affinity and loyalty.

At this point I had to teach myself what the market already knew. I felt like I had nearly 20 years of learning to do to bring myself up to speed and be informed enough to make a good deal and not overspend on things that weren't needed.

After speaking with a number of people that I considered auto experts, I found some really great tools online that helped, including car lease forums and trade magazines that ranked the best cars by quality, safety, comfort and functionality, as well as how fun they were to drive.

As a spreadsheet nerd, I put it all together, including residual value, options for leasing versus buying, and what mileage I would expect to get.

Online targeting fails

During my month-long process so yes, I guess I was the norm in that auto intenders do buy within the 30-day window I realized both that digital marketing can help this experience in many ways, but also that there were major gaps in this strategy:

*Missed opportunities:* While I did receive competitor car ads alongside car ads for my specific search terms, there were plenty of opportunities for the actual car I bought (Volvo) and its competitive set to do a conquesting campaign.

I learned mostly about who Volvo competes against in asking the dealers who they mostly lose deals to and brands such as Audi and BMW came up. However, I never saw an ad for those in my search.

*Frequency overload:* For the brands that did target me, the frequency with which they did was overwhelming, highlighting a gap in data targeting that they likely were not aware of or could not control via their ad targeting plan, such as multiple sources fighting for my impression and various walled gardens that would not share data with other partners leading to this bottleneck.

In the end, I was left feeling fatigued and negatively influenced by brand marketing that wasn't properly controlled.

*Identity crisis:* This may be an isolated issue as the pandemic forced people to move in with family or temporarily relocate to addresses that are not their own, but by targeting at a household level via IP address all members within that household begin to get targeting ads for the brand or product.

As a result, this past summer when I was staying with family, my brother-in-law and mother-in-law were all consistently getting car ads on their mobile devices even though they were not in the market for a new car. This means a wasted impression on someone who is not going to buy, and a miss to the individual in the household who is going to buy.

*The never-ending story:* The biggest gap I noticed was that this online targeting never ended. It took nearly another two to three months for the targeted car ads to stop and mostly was from one to two brands that did not seem to have a time cap or the ability to connect with that user to see if they were, in fact, still interested in buying a car.

We can do better

So I am asking you, digital auto marketers, to fully review the data-driven journey and ask: How will your digital strategy impact your consumer's experience? Here are some ways to solve the issues:

- Include brand surveys and other in-flight data points during your targeting and conquesting campaign to find out if consumers are still in the market for the purchase or if they have already made a purchase. If you find out the latter, consider changing your creative message or trying to influence their next purchasing decision.

- Find a strong data partner to assess all marketing touch points and ensure your ad frequency is handled so that you do not overwhelm your buyer with too many ads, especially when it comes to CTV.

- Ensure your creative matches your customer's journey. Are you pushing price? Electric cars? Family SUVs?

- Ensure your creative matches your customer's journey. Are you pushing price? Electric cars? Family SUVs? Knowing more about your customer in the process will help your marketing efforts resonate better and turn into relevant opportunities.

- Connect online and offline efforts. Create ways for your dealerships to determine what drove their customers into the store. By knowing how a customer found out about your brand, auto brand marketers will be able to better understand their digital and creative strategy in real-time.

AUTOMOTIVE PURCHASES are amongst the most expensive purchases consumers make, and it is imperative that auto manufacturers and dealers reach in-market buyers in the most effective and relevant way through smart advertising and targeting.

Real-time consumer sentiment is key to providing a better ad experience and to avoid chasing consumers with ads after they have already made a purchase.

With these efforts, brands can effectively redirect ads to people who are in-market, maximizing their budgets while also creating more relevant experiences and long-lasting consumer relationships.

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