“WAITING FOR THE F&I PERSON” BLUES

One of the most frustrating events a salesperson faces on the road to a sale is the transition between the front-end close and the initiation of F&I into the process of wrapping up the deal. We have all heard the horror stories of customers waiting two (2) hours to be delivered. Though a great number of these stories are exaggerated, to your salespeople (waiting to T.O. their customers to F&I) it really does seem like an eternity. The primary culprit behind this situation is not the case of an inefficient F&I manager; rather it is a case of enforced inactivity. Busy days and spot deliveries only add to these delays (however long they may truly be) causing them to occur more, not less, frequently.

An easy way to relate to this might be to imagine driving to a very important appointment. Suddenly you find yourself in a massive traffic jam…instant gridlock. Quickly you search your mind for alternate routes, but you realize that there are none. As the minutes drag by, you creep forward with agonizing slowness. Each elapsed minute diminishes the likelihood of reaching your end goal (the crucial meeting) on time. How many of us under those circumstances find ourselves passing through successive stages of apprehension, anxiety, agitation, frustration, and ultimately anger? Have you ever had a passenger and really thought about how they were reacting to your feelings? Did they not also experience some anxiety and apprehension?

To a large degree, just as your passenger mirrored your emotions, a customer waiting with a salesperson undergoes a similar process. Some of these delays are unavoidable, but many are within our control. We can also productively utilize this time to enhance C.S.I. and F&I incomes.

The first thing that must occur is properly executed paperwork being given to F&I. To assure this, the F&I manager should review the paperwork (buyer’s orders, credit apps, etc.) to assure all the information necessary is available. Nothing creates greater delay than the F&I manager trying to load a deal into the computer and having to stop due to inaccurate or incomplete paperwork. F&I must then page the salesperson, wait until he arrives, tell him what is needed, wait until he returns with the desired data, and finally continue. The normal elapsed time is about five (5) minutes. The problem is compounded if the F&I manager later finds that he lacks an additional item or two, and has to repeat the above mentioned process. This could easily develop into a situation where loading the deal becomes a 25-30 minute ordeal.

In addition to being inefficient, it is unprofessional and a burden on the salespeople. By verifying all the needed information is there prior to inputting it into the computer, we can reduce loading time to a manageable 10-15 minutes per deal. It also assures that if additional information is required, the salesperson can make one trip and get all the necessary information. This not only boosts efficiency; it also boosts sales force confidence in F&I ability.

We now have a situation where the salesperson has fifteen (15) or so minutes alone with the customer. Left to their own devices, the salesperson will sit there, and with each passing moment experience greater degrees of fear and loss. The salesperson’s anxiety and “what’s taking so long?” agitation begin to communicate themselves to the customer. During this period, the customer may be undergoing some “buyer’s remorse”. This is only exacerbated by the tension transmitted by the salesperson. If you have ever witnessed this dynamic, you feel that you can cut the air with a knife. Obviously, this high level of anxiety and tension negatively impact the F&I close. It is the major contributing factor to 67% of new car buyers (surveyed by JD Power & Associates) stating that the F&I experience was the worst part of the purchase.

By developing a purposeful mission for the salesperson and the customer during this “down time”, we can positively influence C.S.I. and substantially impact the effectiveness of F&I. Every C.S.I. program aims to assure a positive, enjoyable delivery experience. Unfortunately, after the customer comes out of F&I, he/she is usually bundled into the car and sent down the road as fast as is humanly possible. This frequently results in some negative feedback on the C.S.I. scorecard. How many times have we seen customers send back reports indicating that the gas tank wasn’t full at delivery? This is in spite of the fact that the company dictates and gasoline expenses support that every car is delivered with a full tank. Because the customer doesn’t see it, it never happened. The first time the customer notices the gas gauge, it is hovering around a quarter-tank. The fact that the customer has driven 250 miles since delivery doesn’t compute.

By performing such C.S.I.-driven activities such as service lane walk, buttons and knobs presentation, and driving the customer while the salesperson puts gas in the car, we can eat up the dead time and increase the effectiveness of F&I. How? The service lane walk called for by C.S.I. would be an excellent opportunity to meet the service advisor and/or service manager. They could explain recommended service and endorse the extended parts and labor agreement. One dealership I know of has a service advisor and/or service manager available each night after regular service hours to meet customers and pass out cards. They all take their turns, including the service manager, one night a week. In addition to improving C.S.I. and extended service agreement penetrations, the Dealer feels this contributes to an increase in non-repair service income (tune-ups, oil changes, etc.); especially given the stiff competition from Jiffy Lube and other like establishments.

The salesman could then take his customer and do the C.S.I.-required interior feature benefit presentation, highlighting the location and function of the various buttons and knobs. Many dealership personnel seem to feel that this is unnecessary if an adequate walk-around presentation occurred while on the road to a sale. There are, however, a couple of major differences. During the walk-around prior to buying a car, the customer was learning about a car. The fear of the upcoming negotiation of price may have diminished his attention. After the agreement on price, the customer is now learning about his car. The difference in excitement and attention levels should be apparent to all. This also reinforces in the buyer’s mind that he/she made a “good” decision; diminishing the occurrence and/or intensity of buyer’s remorse. Finally, it increases the excitement about the car itself immediately prior to the introduction to F&I, reminding the customer why the car is worth the price (reinforcement of value).

The third thing the dealership can do (after the interior presentation, since the customer is probably already in the car) is have the salesperson drive the customer to the gas station for the pre-delivery fill-up. This way, the customer actually sees the gas being pumped and experiences the exceptional level of quality service provided by your dealership to its customers.

When the salesperson and customer return, the F&I manager will be waiting for them, instead of the other way around. The customer will be fresh from experiencing the quality of the vehicle and your dealership’s commitment to service. This combination will have a dramatic and positive impact once the customer is introduced into F&I.

To work effectively, it must be like a barbershop on a busy Saturday; that is, first-come, first-served. The sales managers and F&I must work together to assure that no one cuts in line, out-of-turn. Once implemented, and the bugs get worked out, the dealership benefits through enhanced C.S.I., higher F&I revenue, and lower sales force stress.