

# 9 Tips for Choosing an Automotive Internet Lead Provider (ILP)

Written by, Dr. Neil Jan Gale

Using an online classified advertising company to generate quality vehicle sales leads is smart business. You can reach customers that would never have heard of your dealership otherwise. It's really a simple process. The Internet Lead Provider (ILP) generates a potential customer for your new or used vehicle by forwarding an e-mail inquiry or a telephone call to the dealership. A sales person answers the e-mail or phone call and sets up an appointment for the customer to come and test drive and buy the vehicle. Sounds simple, right? All you have to do is reply to an e-mail or answer a "phone-up". After starting and developing two dealerships Internet departments, I realized that nothing could be further from the truth.

**NOTE: *Keep in mind that a certain percentage of Internet customers will just appear at the dealership, with printouts of a vehicle or two hidden somewhere on their person.***

Customers usually don't find a vehicle on the Internet, contact the seller and purchase it on the spot. So begins the first issue; getting the potential customer to click to view the vehicle details after your vehicle is returned from a search. Secondly, once the customer is looking at the vehicle details and a photo of the actual vehicle, what would entice that person to either, call and ask a question about that vehicle, or to send an e-mail with a question? The seller has 2 slim chances to impress the shopper enough to get contacted. The quality of the photograph is one, and the vehicles description is the second one. Below are 9 tips for choosing an ILP that I've learned the hard way, first hand.

## 1) File name for used car photos

When signing up with more than one Internet Lead Provider, it is very important to check what the photo file name needs to be for that ILP. The industry standard uses the dealership's vehicle stock number to name the photos. If any other naming syntax is required, such as using the ad number for that vehicle, or using the vehicle's identification number (VIN: a 17 character alpha-numeric string that is prone to typos), be very leery. Avoid all the extra effort involved in keeping two or more sets of photos (each set with a different naming syntax) straight.

Keep the photo management issue under control by minimizing manual processes (not using more than one file naming syntax) and simplifying automated ones (using FTP to upload photos. See Tip #3).

## 2) Used vehicle options

Most ILP's are using computer application that "breaks-out" the vehicle's factory options from codes in the VIN number. That gives the consumer some information about that exact vehicle. But wait... doesn't every vehicle get the same treatment? If you've ever seen a classified advertisement in a newspaper, you already know this fact: The classified ads are filled with marketing terms like; One Owner, Low Miles, Loaded, etc. You're missing the opportunity to distinguish your vehicle from all the other vehicles that returned from the ILP's search. Inputting the options manually via the ILP's website usually results in that vehicle being removed from the polling of your Dealer Management System (DMS), forcing you to face another management tracking issue.

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### **3) Uploading photos**

The photograph of the used vehicle that you post to the ILP's website is worth a thousand words. Most likely, a good photo will entice the buyer to call, email or just stop in to view that vehicle.

Depending upon who shoots the pictures and who uploads them to the ILP the photo management processes is an easy one. The preferred method is File Transfer Protocol (FTP). In essence, it's like copying a computer file from your computer to the ILP's computer directly. Using this method alleviates the tracking of single photos. Every time I upload new photos, I upload ALL the photos. Whatever is there gets over-written. Sooner or later you'll have to re-shoot a vehicle photo to remove a snowy background or poor angle. By uploading all the photos, you'll be able to keep up-to-date without any headaches.

Some ILP's offer a private Internet site to manage your dealership's inventory and photos. If you are offered the opportunity to upload an entire directory in one click, that is as good as the FTP method. On the other hand, if you must pick files individually, that is a very time consuming process and again forces you to face another management tracking issue.

### **4) Printability**

Anybody who has been on the internet and tried to printout a page has encountered this problem. After shopping the Internet for a used car and printing out the few you are interested in, you find that on one of the car printouts the right-hand side of the webpage and text did not print. All the text lines just cut off. What happened? If you catch this error while you are still on the computer and you are knowledgeable enough about computers to change the printer settings to landscape the page, you can then print a readable copy. But a majority of Internet users are not that knowledgeable, thus discarding your information without giving it a second thought and choosing from the remaining printouts. You're out of the running.

### **5) How many clicks?**

Once on the consumer website for the ILP, how many times do you have to click the mouse to get to the information you are looking for? How about the choices you have to make before getting search results? Test the website yourself. Search for new and used vehicles. Count the clicks. When you choose a vehicle make from a dropdown menu does the page refresh and display a new advertisement? Chances are, if you're annoyed so are most visitors.

### **6) XML leads**

Dealerships that have more than one or two ILP's usually turn to a Customer Relationship Manager (CRM) application to help manage all incoming leads from the different providers. There are two ways to receive the leads. First is text format. Nothing fancy, just the characters. When this is sent into a CRM it is seen as e-mail. You then have to copy & paste or drag & drop the e-mail information a line at a time into the CRM to make it a new record.

If the ILP can send the lead in Extended Mark-up Language (XML) that email would automatically populate the correct fields in the CRM, (assuming that the CRM accepts XML) thus saving a ton of time and effort.

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### 7) Bandwidth

There are a lot of people using their employer's time and Internet connection to shop on the internet for a car. ILP's who have websites that play music or have sound from a shockwave or flash opening presentation usually get closed within seconds to avoid alerting others at work to unauthorized use of their workstation.

When viewing the ILP's website, keep in mind that over 50% of a website's visitors come from AOL and perhaps up to 65% are on a 56kbs dial-up connection. The consumer site should be very quick to load and not intrusive with advertising and pop-up windows.

**OK... Get out your Highlighter pen and HIGHLIGHT TIP #8**

### 8) Dealers representatives

The ILP's sales representatives must be knowledgeable and willing to share that knowledge with you. Most ILP's monitor and capture statistical information on website activity for your dealership. They also have the advantage of the statistical information gathered from all dealership using their services, providing you with help in marketing your vehicles in ways you may not have thought of yourself; i.e. showing no mileage for vehicles over 100,000 miles, or what banner or tile ad will attract a click-through.

### 9) Consumer Website Usability

How many pop-up ads can a normal person take? The website opens in your browser and along with it is a pop-up ad. So I click to close it. Some site pop-up ads place the ad window behind the browser window, forcing me to click twice to exit that window. Click the back button on the browser and a new pop-up appears from the page you just left. How long would you continue to fight the advertisements? Look at the website from the customer's perspective. How easy was it to find your vehicle ad after a search? Can you sort the results differently?

Once you give the ILP's website a test drive and it meets your expectations, you can move on the next issue. How will you manage the leads when they come in?

2004 NOTE:

**Dr. Neil Jan Gale** possesses over 24 years of B2B, and B2C sales, marketing and customer service experience. Nine years in Internet development working with clients including companies like AT&T/Lucent Technologies, Sun Microsystems, Montgomery Ward, Monsanto, GE Aircraft Engines, and others. Dr. Gale boasts 16 years of executive and senior level management experience within the automobile sales and finance industry. He played a significant role in the successful start-up of 6 companies including 2 he owned himself. Dr. Neil Jan Gale can be reached at 1-800-736-1036 or by e-mail at: [DrGale@drgale.com](mailto:DrGale@drgale.com)

[DrGale.com](http://DrGale.com)