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Dealership Staffers Urged to Play Nice

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In a perfect world, dealership salespeople and finance and insurance managers get along famously, working hand in hand to seal every deal.

Welcome to the real world. Department conflicts can pop up at any place of employment. But at some dealerships, skirmishes between showroom and F&I staffers are all in a day's work.

"How do you get sales and F&I to play well together?" says Rich Moore, training director at Protective Asset Protection, an F&I services provider.

It's not easy. "It's a leadership issue," he says. But managers can unwittingly lead people into battle.

Training programs try to resolve differences and stress the importance of both sides working together. "But it can all fall apart when people get back to the dealership," Moore says.

The two departments easily can find themselves at cross purposes. Salespeople want to sell a car. They don't want F&I personnel to muck it up by alienating customers with long-winded aftermarket product pitches or blow a deal by faulting the way it is structured.

On the other hand, F&I managers resent it when sales personnel carelessly and prematurely quote monthly payments, as well as expect the F&I office to magically get loans on expensive cars for credit-challenged customers who can't afford them and do major repairs on badly assembled deals.

An F&I manager tells of a salesman who handed him customer paperwork, saying he hoped he could work something out. But chances of arranging a loan dimmed after the F&I manager asked if the prospective car buyer had a job.

"Well, he worked at a pizza place, but he hasn't been there for a couple of days because he ran out of gas," the salesman said. The 40-something customer wasn't helpful in suggesting the F&I manager list him as "retired" on a credit application.

Inherent differences aside, sales and F&I personnel should work as allies for everyone's benefit, including the dealership's, training experts say at a recent F&I Summit.

Despite the risk of relapse, training programs "bridge the gap and cover things each side needs to do to get the job done," says Peter Chafetz, training manager-national sales for Allstate Dealer Services.

"You get both groups talking, and emphasize that they need each other to generate more profit. Then life at the dealership gets better," he says.

It may function as a symbiotic relationship. Yet it's a vital one, John Vecchioni, national trainer for United

Car Care, says. “If no one sells a car, the F&I office means nothing.”

But it’s the salesperson’s responsibility to “put the customer in the right car,” not one that is out of reach financially, says Pete Velau, who oversees training for SouthWest Dealer Services.

The sales team ranks as the F&I office’s No.1 customer, says Heather Haynes, a JM&A training manager. “You need a relationship between the two.”

However, even F&I managers who formerly worked the sales floor can show a surprising lack of empathy for showroom operations. “A lot of times, salespeople transferred to F&I get amnesia, forgetting about where they came from,” Haynes says.

Often, it’s the same old story. “It can be a communication problem,” says Ben Carpenter, training director at GSFSGroup.

In such cases, people misinterpret motives, with an F&I manager thinking a salesperson is trying to box him out of a deal and a salesman thinking the F&I manager isn’t working hard enough to make a deal happen.

Both sides can do a better job of reaching out to each other, experts say. For instance, salespeople should properly introduce customers to the F&I manager. “And if the F&I managers get out and help close deals, salespeople will reciprocate,” Carpenter says.

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