

The Road to Mediocrity

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“I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.”
–Theodore Roosevelt



F&I professionals are not born that way. F&I superstars are not “discovered” on F&I Idol, and they do not achieve exceptional performance, profits and CSI by accident. Every F&I professional I’ve ever encountered has been well trained. And every top producer also continues to improve his or her skills. And finally, they’re always highly motivated – either by themselves, a great dealer or a great coach – like an agent entrepreneur.

Becoming an F&I professional is not easy. Neither is becoming a successful agent. It’s hard work. Doors get slammed in your face. You confirm an appointment for the next day, drive four hours, only to get stood up. Dealers negotiate your commission down to nothing, then expect you to train their F&I managers – who don’t want training – for free. I mean, let’s be realistic, if the dealer and F&I managers are not committed to ongoing training, there is no way you’re going to make it happen, right?

“Let’s be realistic,” is the first step on the road to mediocrity. And it’s a nice, smooth, straight, wide road with several lanes. Unfortunately, the road to success is a winding mountain road with lots of steep inclines, sharp turns and potholes. It’s narrow, it’s rough, it’s not well marked and if you don’t maintain your focus, it’s easy to go over the edge.

Every F&I development company tracks results. In my experience, the key to improving F&I performance at any dealership is also to track effort. For a training program to be truly effective, training has to be an ongoing process, not a one-time event. That means creating, implementing, maintaining and monitoring an ongoing F&I training program is absolutely essential to improving your dealers’ F&I performance and profits.

As a training company, we constantly evaluate dealers’ F&I people, their knowledge, their skills and their processes to identify opportunities to improve performance and provide the resources and training they need to improve. Unfortunately, in far too many dealerships, once that F&I person returns from their initial training class, there are no organized ongoing training activities. The F&I manager is left to twist in the wind, with the dealer and the agent both hoping they will get better on their own.

A major reason many F&I people fail to achieve their full potential is because inaction and re-action is almost always easier than action and being pro-active. What keeps most people from becoming truly successful is that inner voice that is constantly asking, “Why should I bother?” That inner voice has a thousand reasons why something won’t work, they can’t do it and they don’t have the time to do it.

Unfortunately, whenever someone stops learning, exercising or practicing, over time their skills and performance begin to regress. For the long-term, it is simply not possible for an F&I manager to maintain their current level of performance. Unless they are continuously improving their skills, their performance will begin to go downhill. A professional strives to continually find ways to grow in their work, otherwise any job eventually becomes boring, routine and a waste of time.

I don’t know any dealer, agent or F&I manager who doesn’t want to make more money. Most are very receptive to any “tips” you can give them that will help them to sell more products, because every F&I manager wants that magic bullet to overcome any objection and close every sale. The problem with an ongoing training program is it actually requires work on their part. Unfortunately, success is never easy.

Many people spend their whole life on the road to mediocrity because they prefer to be comfortable. It’s up to you to make your F&I managers uncomfortable. How? First, you have to instill the expectation of continuous improvement. You can’t expect F&I performance to improve without implementing a process to make it happen! You must establish performance goals and expectations, with specific training assignments, role-play exercises, evaluation criteria and mile-markers indicating their progress.

Ongoing training has to be like brushing your teeth; something F&I managers are expected to do every day. What are your F&I managers doing today to improve their skills for tomorrow? Whenever an F&I manager reaches a new level of performance, that should automatically become the new norm. It doesn't matter what they did last month, that isn't good enough this month.

Second, ongoing training must be part of every F&I manager's job description and compensation plan. We all know your pay plan is your job description. If you want an F&I manager to be concerned about Income Per Retail Unit, you base part of their compensation on SPRU. If you want them to focus on Products Per Retail Unit or customer satisfaction, you base part of their compensation on PPRU and CSI. And if you want them to do their training assignments, you must make training part of their compensation plan. There have to be consequences, either positive or negative, of doing or not doing training.

Third, to ensure your manager's skills continue to improve, creating a monthly training calendar with a weekly training assignment is a great way to ensure they continue to improve their skills. If you want someone to practice, you have to give them something to practice. It's important, however, that you don't start something you can't or won't continue.

So start small, with one training assignment a week, which should require no more than fifteen to twenty minutes for them to complete. Some typical training assignments might be:

- List two parts covered by your service agreement, what the part is, what it does, what happens when it fails, where it is on the vehicle, and how much it costs to fix;
- List five open-ended needs discovery questions for GAP; and
- List three common objections for tire & wheel road hazard protection and write out a customer-focused response.

It's critical you actually review their training assignments and provide them with feedback, as well as track whether or not they have been completed. If you want performance to improve, you have to track effort, not just results.

Finally, video recording and reviewing actual F&I presentations is a great training tool, because it allows you to see what's really happening behind closed doors. We find this is one of the greatest training aides we have. As an agent, it's also a great way to bring additional value to your dealers, because they know someone is actually monitoring what's happening in the F&I office.

Videos of every F&I manager's presentation can easily be accessed and viewed by authorized users via the Internet for training, customer satisfaction and compliance purposes. You also need to conduct regular testing of every manager's consultative selling skills.

Avoiding the road to mediocrity requires implementing an ongoing F&I training program in every dealership. Ongoing training will prevent your F&I managers from becoming complacent, and ensures they continue to improve their consultative skills. Continuous improvement should be expected; complacency is unacceptable. Here's where you are, here's where we need to be and here's how we're going to get there! While the road to mediocrity may be easier, the road to success is a lot more profitable.

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