



The Empty F&I Office

BY RICK MCCORMICK

Looking to kill some downtime? Top trainer urges F&I pros to hit the show floor, consult with service staff, and take care of your 'other' customers — including the ones you see every day.

I had to laugh recently when I heard yet another salesperson say, “I want to be an F&I manager. It’s easy and they make a lot of money.” It looks easy from outside the F&I office. What most salespeople don’t see is what happens when the F&I office is empty. The research, the practice, and the intentional effort required to become an F&I professional. The commitment to helping customers. A genuine desire to encourage and build up the team around them.

And yet, at times, we forget what we should be doing when we don’t have a customer in the office. The greater the focus in downtime, the greater the profits when it’s showtime!

Dabo Swinney, head coach for the national champion Clemson Tigers said it perfectly in his statement at the White House: “Champions are made when the stands are empty. When they’re full, that’s just hard work paying off!” Peak performers maximize their downtime. Here are a few things to do when your office is empty.

1. GET OUT OF THE OFFICE AND MIX WITH CUSTOMERS.

Many customers have been warned about that aggressive F&I person they will meet at the end of the buying process. This person will try to pressure them to buy products they don’t think they need or want. The best way to alleviate these concerns is to interact with your customers on the sales floor.

This empty-office solution provides two great benefits: You are no longer a stranger they only meet at the end of the transaction. And most importantly, they will learn you are a nice person who is working to help them.

We know 100% of a customer’s present behavior is based on 100% of their past experience. You may have to prove you are different.

One peak performer I know attempts to meet every customer before they buy and asks, “You haven’t test-driven the car yet, right?” No matter the customer’s reply, the F&I manager always has a witty response that lightens the mood and sparks a positive interaction. The mood and tone of the interaction in the F&I office is best set outside the office.

2. SPEND TIME WITH THE FIRST RESPONDERS.

Service writers and technicians can provide the most insight on how unexpected mechanical issues affect customers. They deal with them firsthand. They can paint a picture that you can

then share with your next customer. To move more customers to self-discover their need, they must learn something they didn’t know before they met you.

Customers have no idea how much a minor problem can cost on today’s vehicles. There are three important reasons why a minor repair can be a major expense on a vehicle today: (1) component parts, (2) advanced automotive technology, and (3) replacement rather than repair of a failed component. When you provide facts *and* relate how those facts impacted another customer, it moves them to reconsider their preset objection. We know they need the product, and now they realize it too!

3. STRENGTHEN KEY RELATIONSHIPS.

Two of the most important customers you work with every day are your salespeople and bank representatives. Investing time with these key people will provide great dividends.

First, call your bank representatives to express a genuine appreciation for their valued partnership. I recently had an F&I director call me to cancel a meeting. The reason? He and his wife were attending his bank rep’s daughter’s school play! That personal relationship was the result of many phone calls when the F&I director’s office was empty. His finance sources love him. We say it all the time: Customers buy from someone they like. Non-business, genuine-appreciation phone calls make you likeable!

Salespeople are more than co-workers, they are our internal customers! We treat our external customers much like we treat our internal customers. It’s easy to catch a salesperson doing something wrong. Focus on catching them doing something right! Show appreciation for their efforts and point out that effort to their superiors.

The work you do with customers in the F&I office is not easy or magic. It takes talent, skill and hard work to make an F&I department profitable month after month. Some of the most caring, committed, and hardworking people in the dealership are often found in the F&I office. The hard work happens when the office is empty. Great F&I performance, profits, and income is just that hard work paying off! Keep climbing! ■

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