



THE NON-FRANCHISE AUTO DEALER'S GUIDE TO CHOOSING THE RIGHT **MARKETING PARTNER**



Choosing the Right Marketing Partner for Non-Franchise Auto Dealerships

According to Capterra, 58% of businesses say they regret a technology purchase within the first year.¹

Why? Because they didn't think long-term.

They focused on short-term fixes, locked into contracts with limited flexibility, and overlooked how their non-franchise auto dealership and the market would evolve.

Don't let that be you.

This guide isn't just a vendor checklist. It's built to help non-franchise auto dealers ask the right questions now—so they choose a vendor who will scale with them, support them, and innovate alongside them as they grow.

¹Source: capterra.com/resources/us-tech-trends/

GETTING STARTED

Before you start researching marketing partners, outline your dealership's goals and constraints. This framework will help you focus on marketing organizations that offer the services and pricing that fit your needs.

DEFINE YOUR MARKETING GOALS

Before searching for a new website and marketing partner, clearly identify your specific goals. Determine what you want to achieve, whether it's increasing sales, expanding brand awareness, generating leads, or improving customer retention. Having well-defined objectives will help you find a partner that aligns with your needs.

ASSESS YOUR BUDGET

Understand your budget and allocate funds accordingly. Ensure you have a reasonable budget that allows you to invest in a quality partner. While cost is a consideration, prioritize value and ROI over choosing the cheapest option.



MUST-HAVE QUALITIES OF A GOOD MARKETING PARTNER

When choosing a marketing partner, it's important to evaluate if their business model aligns with your dealership's needs. While many vendors offer high-quality services, the right partner should also bring industry expertise, top-notch customer service, and a collaborative approach.

INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE

When choosing a marketing partner, it's crucial to ensure they have extensive experience in the non-franchise auto industry. A partner with deep industry knowledge will understand the unique challenges and opportunities your dealership faces. They will be better equipped to create tailored strategies that resonate with your target audience and drive meaningful results.

REPUTATION & REFERENCES

A reputable marketing partner should have a strong track record of success and positive reviews from clients. Request references and case studies to see how they've helped other dealerships achieve their goals. This transparency will give you confidence in their ability to deliver on their promises and provide valuable insights into what you can expect from the partnership.

UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR BUSINESS & TARGET AUDIENCE

Your marketing partner should take the time to understand your dealership's specific needs, goals, and challenges. They should also have a keen understanding of your target audience, including their preferences, behaviors, and buying patterns. This knowledge will enable them to develop more effective marketing strategies that attract and retain customers.

Your marketing partner should have proven experience in the non-franchise auto industry, as their specialized knowledge can directly contribute to achieving your dealership's goals.

INNOVATIVE & UP-TO-DATE STRATEGIES

Marketing is always changing, especially online. To stay competitive, your dealership needs a partner who understands the latest trends and can create strategies that work for your business. Customers expect more now—like easy online shopping and personalized communication. A good marketing partner will make sure you have the right tools to keep up, meet customer needs, and grow your dealership.

A great partner listens attentively to your requirements and proposes tailored strategies based on data and industry trends. Be cautious of partners who push one-size-fits-all solutions without understanding your dealership's unique needs. Effective strategies should be outcome-based, focusing on your specific objectives and delivering measurable results.

CUSTOMIZATION & FLEXIBILITY

Every dealership is unique, so your marketing partner should offer customizable solutions that can be tailored to your specific needs. They should also be flexible enough to adapt their strategies as your business evolves. This ensures that your marketing efforts remain relevant and effective over time.

TAILORED MARKETING FOR EVERY DEALERSHIP SIZE

When seeking a marketing partner for your non-franchise auto dealership, it's essential to find one that can cater to the size of your business. If you're a small, local dealership competing against multi-location giants, your marketing partner must understand the unique challenges you face, such as limited resources and budget constraints, and be able to scale your marketing strategies accordingly.

Every dealership is unique, so your marketing partner should provide customizable solutions that match your specific needs.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

When selecting a marketing partner for your dealership in the non-franchise auto industry, it's important to find one that views the relationship as a collaboration rather than a one-sided service. They should be open to feedback and willing to work together to achieve your goals. You aren't just looking for a vendor; you want a true partner who will support your business needs in the long run. This type of partnership means actively engaging with your team, understanding your unique challenges, and tailoring strategies that drive growth and success. Choose a collaborative partner who values your input and is committed to your dealership's future.

ONGOING TRAINING & SUPPORT

A good marketing partner provides continuous training and support to ensure you make the most of their services and tools. This commitment encompasses regular updates, which keep you informed about new features, industry developments, and best practices essential for maintaining a competitive edge. Additionally, it involves training sessions tailored to your team's needs, whether through online guides or interactive webinars, ensuring that everyone is well-versed in using the latest marketing tools and strategies effectively. Responsive customer support is another cornerstone. A good marketing partner should offer multiple support channels such as phone, email, or chat to promptly address any questions or concerns, and swiftly resolve issues.

Ask your prospective marketing partner about their customer support quality:

- ✓ **What is the average turnaround time for addressing questions and requests?**
- ✓ **Will your dealership have an assigned account representative for direct support?**
- ✓ **How are urgent requests escalated to the proper departments?**

A marketing partner should have a versatile support team available via email and phone, ensuring they're accessible and responsive. This reliable support system not only aids in quick issue resolution but also improves their reputation and your overall satisfaction.

Ask your prospective marketing partner about their training and support offerings. Do they have regular updates, training sessions, and responsive customer support to help you maximize the use of their services and tools?

PRICING TRANSPARENCY

When selecting a marketing partner, request detailed pricing information to ensure their rates align with your budget. Be cautious of partners offering extremely low prices, as this could indicate subpar results. A trustworthy marketing partner will clearly break down their package offerings and recommend a tier that suits your needs.

Your marketing partner should be fully aware of your monthly marketing budget and only suggest strategies that fit within your budget constraints. They should also strive to maximize the use of your marketing budget, ensuring all resources are effectively utilized for optimal results.



ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR NON-FRANCHISE AUTO DEALERSHIPS

Choosing a marketing partner that offers services specifically tailored to the non-franchise auto industry is essential for maximizing your marketing efforts and achieving optimal results.

OPTIMIZED WEBSITE DESIGN AND PERFORMANCE

Your website is your dealership's digital storefront, so it should reflect your brand identity with consistent logos and colors, while offering a customizable online showroom and inventory listings. When evaluating a marketing partner, ask about their standards for website performance:

- ✓ **What is the page load speed like?**
- ✓ **Does the website present your inventory in a clean and appealing manner?**
- ✓ **Can the development team meet your specific requirements?**
- ✓ **If a request can't be completely fulfilled, do they provide suitable alternatives?**

A well-designed, high-performance website will help attract and retain customers, supporting your dealership's success in the non-franchise auto market.

PRE-LOADED SERVICES

A high-quality marketing partner should provide pre-loaded services like online inventory management, comprehensive eCatalog services, automated email marketing, relieving you of these responsibilities. They should implement processes to seamlessly integrate data between your CRM, DMS, and third-party platforms, eliminating the need for manual data retrieval and management. These services should be user-friendly if you wish to manage them yourself, or they can be entirely handled by the partner. Offering such pre-loaded services distinguishes a good marketing partner from a standard ad agency.

FULL-SERVICE CAPABILITY

When selecting a marketing partner, look for one that provides a wide array of services beyond basic website management. Essential offerings should include digital marketing (SEO, automated email marketing, price watch notifications), Google Business Profile management, and reputation management. Partnering with a full-service provider can streamline your marketing activities and maintain a cohesive strategy across all platforms.

COMMUNICATION AND REPORTING

Effective communication is essential for a successful partnership. Choose a marketing partner that provides clear and regular updates on campaign progress, performance metrics, and other relevant data. It's crucial that your website includes robust analytics tools to enable data-driven decision-making. If your role involves reporting to stakeholders, having transparent communication from your marketing partner is vital so you can fulfill internal information requests.



KNOW BEFORE YOU BUY: HOW TO EVALUATE VENDOR PRICING THE RIGHT WAY

When comparing vendors, it's tempting to zero in on the base website price. But the sticker price doesn't always tell the full story—and it's often what isn't included that ends up costing you more.

Here are two key things every dealer should consider before committing:

DON'T COMPARE JUST ON PRICE—COMPARE ON PACKAGE VALUE

Some vendors advertise website packages for as low as \$99/month—but be cautious. These often start as entry-level offerings and then charge extra for essential features like:

- ✓ Inventory Syndication (Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, Cars.com, etc.)
- ✓ Lead Management Tools (CRM)
- ✓ Chat or Messaging Tools
- ✓ Digital Retailing Tools
- ✓ Reporting & Analytic Platforms

What looks like a bargain up front can become far more expensive once all the “must-have” features are added in. Evaluate the **total monthly investment** for what you actually need, not just the starting price.

EVALUATE HOW THE TOOLS WORK TOGETHER—NOT JUST INDIVIDUALLY

Buying a platform isn't just about what features are offered—it's about how they interact. Look for solutions where the website, inventory, leads, and retailing tools are designed to complement one another across your buyer journey.

For example:

- ✓ Does your website connect seamlessly to your inventory updates and lead capture?
- ✓ Will shoppers who engage with your digital retailing tools flow automatically into your CRM?
- ✓ Can your reporting tools track how one stage of the journey impacts another?

Disconnected vendors might offer piecemeal solutions, but that often results in duplicated effort, missed leads, and more time spent managing systems instead of selling.

The real value comes from how well the solution supports your business **from the first click to the final sale.**

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VENDOR GUIDE CHECKLIST

Use the checklist to find a vendor that meets your needs and supports your growth.

Category	Feature/Capability	Why It Matters
Website & Platform	Mobile-First Website Design	Ensures your site is optimized for modern shoppers—especially on smartphones.
	Hosting, Domains, SSL Included	Avoid hidden costs or extra setup hurdles.
	Multi-Location/Group Website Support	Crucial for growing or multi-rooftop dealers.
	SEO Optimization (Tech & Content)	Improves visibility and drives qualified traffic to your site.
	ADA Compliance & Accessibility Tools	Protects your brand legally and improves user experience.
	Page Speed Optimization	Faster websites reduce bounce rates and improve conversions.
Inventory Tools	Real-Time Inventory Syndication	Keeps listings up to date across all marketplaces automatically.
	360° Spin/Video Inventory Support	Increases engagement and shopper confidence.
	Inventory Pricing Alerts/Notifications	Keeps your pricing competitive and shoppers informed.
	AI Tools for Inventory Syndication & Merchandising	Automates quality content and saves your team time.
	Vehicle Valuation Integration (e.g. Black Book)	Helps buyers assess trade-in value easily.
Lead Management	Built-in CRM or CRM Integration	Centralizes lead handling and follow-up in one platform.
	Lead Routing & Prioritization	Ensures the hottest leads are handled fast.
	Integrated Call/Text/Chat Support	Keeps communication streamlined and accessible.
	Lead Capture Widgets (Quote Tools, Forms, Pop-ups)	Helps maximize lead capture on every page.
Digital Retailing	Payment Estimators & Soft-Pull Financing	Builds buyer confidence and encourages earlier engagement.
	Buyer Self-Qualification	Supports digital deal structuring and checkout.
	Trade-In Tool/Valuation Input	Helps pre-qualify leads and improve lead quality.
Marketing & Advertising	Google Business Profile Optimization	Ensures your dealership shows up accurately in local search.
	Facebook Marketplace Integration	Drives traffic through one of the most active platforms.
	Retargeting & SEM Support	Keeps your brand visible after shoppers leave your site.
	Email Campaign Tools	Drives repeat engagement with past leads or buyers.
	Reputation Management Tools	Builds online reputation and trust.
	3rd Party Marketplace Syndication	Ensures your inventory is automatically syndicated to 3rd party classified marketplaces
Reporting & Insights	Marketing ROI Reporting & Attribution	Helps you understand what's working and where to invest.
	Website + Inventory Performance Dashboards	Helps monitor engagement, lead flow, and listing activity.
	Multi-Rooftop or Group Reporting Support	Consolidates performance across all locations.
Support & Partnership	Dedicated Account Manager	Personal contact improves support and strategy alignment.
	24/7 Helpdesk/Phone/Email Support	Reduces downtime or delays in resolving urgent issues.
	Onboarding & Training Programs	Smooth launches and better internal adoption.
	Product Roadmap Transparency/Feedback Loop	Indicates whether your vendor evolves with the industry.

CONCLUSION

GROW WITH THE VENDOR AS YOU GROW

Choosing a marketing partner isn't just about what they can do for you today—it's about how well they can support your dealership as it evolves.

The right partner should offer scalable technology, services, and support to grow your business. Whether you're a single-location independent dealership or expanding into multiple rooftops, here's how to assess if a vendor can meet your long-term needs.

Key Questions to Ask:

- ✓ **Scalability:** Can this vendor support multi-location growth, inventory expansion, or higher lead volumes without system breakdowns?
- ✓ **Platform Flexibility:** Do they offer layered tools and integrations—such as CRM, digital retailing, or inventory automation—that can be added as needed?
- ✓ **Support at Every Stage:** Will you continue to receive proactive support, training, and strategic guidance as your needs change?
- ✓ **Innovation Track Record:** Are they regularly improving their platform with modern features (e.g., AI, automation, marketplace integrations)?
- ✓ **Customization:** Can their solutions be tailored to different types of inventory, buyer journeys, or regional market needs?

Why This Matters:

The dealership you are today might not be the dealership you will be next year. Your marketing partner shouldn't just be able to keep up—they should help lead the way. Choose a vendor that's committed to innovation, growth, and independent dealer success—at every stage of your journey.



About Dealer Car Search

Dealer Car Search offers digital solutions for Independent Auto dealerships to increase their online presence and visibility, manage leads and inventory through multiple sources, and drive more qualified leads to sales.

Since 2006, we have empowered thousands of dealerships to sell more cars through our digital solutions. By leveraging our real-world experience from running a successful car dealership, we develop solutions that truly deliver results for our customer

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