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FINDING A TECHNOLOGY PARTNER THAT WILL STICK WITH YOU

As seen in AutoSuccess

Why do your longstanding customers keep coming back to your dealership? Is it because you offer the best deals? Maybe. But I'm willing to bet it's because you engage with them after you sell them a car and provide them a level of service they can't get elsewhere.

Similarly, when you invest in technology for your dealership, the solutions provider you work with is nearly as important as the product or service itself.

But how do you find a technology vendor that's a strategic partner who will work with you, both throughout the buying process and after the sale, to get the most out of your investment and not leave you high and dry after you sign on the dotted line? There are a few key areas you should evaluate.

Proven Track Record

How many times have you heard of a company going out of business and leaving its customers in the lurch? To reduce the risk of this scenario

happening to you, consider how long the company you're wanting to work with has been in business and how many customers it has. Also ask if the company can provide references.

Product development is an indicator of company longevity as well. A good technology partner keeps an eye on what's happening in its own industry as well as its clients' industries to ensure that customers get the best service to accomplish their goals.

When evaluating a vendor, look at whether or not the company has a history of expanding the capabilities of its software, product or service. This shows that the vendor can change with the times and evolve to incorporate new technology and meet new industry needs.

Data Security

Data is what makes the world go 'round. If you lose data — whether it's business data or customers' personal information — you risk delaying paperwork, service jobs, new car

sales and more.

Protecting customer data is especially important, as several states have passed consumer data breach protection laws. In addition, a survey by Total Dealer Compliance revealed that nearly 84% of customers wouldn't return to a dealership to buy another vehicle after their data had been compromised.

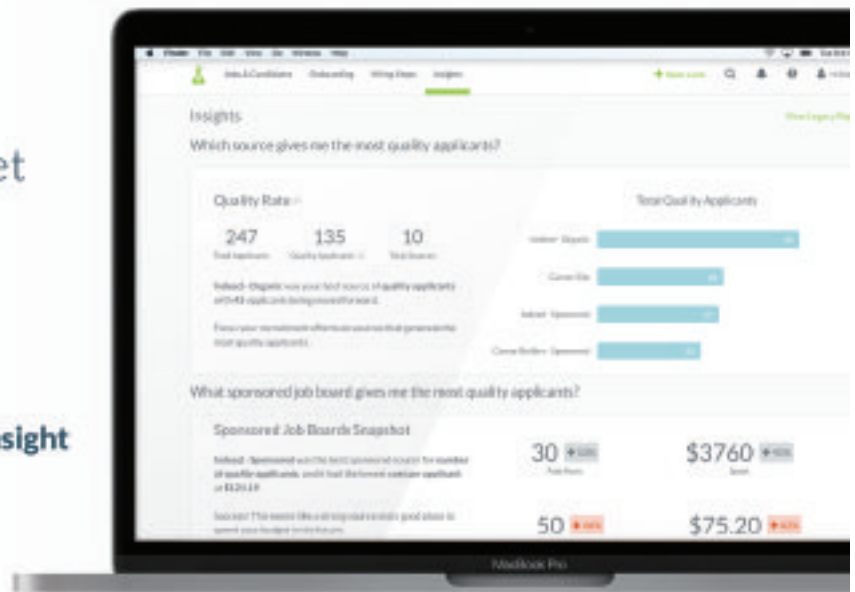
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A sign of a good vendor is one who recognizes how important it is to keep data secure and helps you protect your information assets with IT security and disaster recovery capabilities.

For example, if you have multiple employees using a certain kind of software, access levels that restrict access to the minimum resources required to do their jobs are essential to reducing insider threats. Multifactor authentication also helps prevent users from sharing login credentials. If suspicious activity is detected, ask whether or not the software is equipped with alerts that are triggered by security events.

To avoid data loss from a system failure, cyberattack or other disaster, it's critical to regularly back up your systems to a secure cloud or other location. When purchasing hardware or software, make sure the vendor will work with you to back up any data stored on the system.

Installation

Once your purchase is complete, who's responsible for installing and setting up the hardware or software?

DIY installation and setup might work for easy-to-use software, but you should receive installation and setup services for more complicated applications, such as a DMS, or large hardware, such as electronic key control systems.

Consider what level of service the vendor provides at each step of the process:

- **Pre-installation** — Sometimes preliminary work, such as exporting data or checking system configurations, is required before installing hardware or software. How involved in this process will the vendor be? Will they do some of the legwork for you?
- **Installation and Initial Training** — Find out how much of the installation process the vendor is responsible for and whether they'll provide assistance remotely or on-site (on-site services are ideal for hardware installations). How long will the process take? If issues come up during the installation, will these be documented and addressed? Once the system is set up, will the technician walk you through how to use it?
- **Follow-up** — After the sale and installation, you'll also want to know if you'll receive ongoing communication. Does the installer report back to sales and support personnel on how the installation went (any issues encountered, training covered, etc.)? Do sales or support personnel follow up with you to see if you're satisfied and address any outstanding issues?

Knowing what the installation process will be like ahead of time helps you understand

what level of service you'll receive from your technology partner.

Support, Maintenance and Training

After the sale, what support, maintenance and training services does the vendor offer to help you get the most out of your system? Are these services outsourced to third-party vendors? If so, which ones?

When purchasing a maintenance agreement or extended warranty, make sure you know exactly what it covers. That could include parts replacement, shipping, troubleshooting services, on-site repairs, parts discounts and training.

The better the training and support you receive, the better your return on investment. Typical formats include the following:

- Written tutorials and/or best practices
- Phone training
- Pre-recorded videos
- Live video conferences
- In person (either at your facility or the vendor's)

For simple refreshers or learning small tasks like changing a password, a phone call or tutorial will suffice. For comprehensive training, however, formats that incorporate at least two senses (e.g., visual and auditory) ensure that you grasp and retain the information longer.

Take the time to do some vendor due diligence, and you'll increase your chances of finding a partner — someone who will help you get the most out of your investment — the same way you help your customers maximize theirs. ○



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