

MAZDA PERFORMER

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Members of the St. Louis, Missouri Gateway Miata Club prepare to cross the mighty Mississippi.

Summer Sun Heats Up the Auto Business

**AS TEMPERATURES RISE,
SO DOES BUSINESS**

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Summer Sun Heats Up the Auto Business

Rising Temperatures Mean More Business for Dealerships in Sales, Service and Parts

Summertime. Say that word to a roomful of school children and watch their faces brighten and the excited chatter begin. Even for adults, for whom summer vacation may be a distant memory, there's still something magical and wonderful about the term. We think of digging out our shorts and tank tops, dusting off the camping gear and getting our swimsuit bodies back into shape. Summertime also brings images of hammocks, lazy days and cool drinks sipped in the shade.

However, while some people take a laid-back approach to summer, most automobile customers do not. As soon as daylight savings time gives us an extra hour of sunlight at the end of the day, the awakening begins.

Shoppers have been watching slick advertisements about new cars and trucks all winter long, but they just never felt like trudging out into the snow to a dealership. They've been thinking about test driving a couple of cars they've seen at auto shows, and now it's time to do it. Service customers have been planning to get that tune-up or oil change out of the way, but they haven't found the time. Besides, Christmas and tax season just about wiped out their bank accounts.

But now, with the whiff of barbecue smoke in the air and the crack of bats on neighborhood baseball fields, shoppers and service customers begin to

succumb to the itch. You've seen them looking around the lot all spring, but now they're doing something different - they're coming into the dealership.

Increased summer business can mean good news - or bad news - for dealership employees. Whether you work in the service, parts or sales department, you need to be mentally prepared for the heat and pressure that summertime brings. By keeping organized and maintaining a good attitude, you can make the most of the summer months, and make a positive impact on customer satisfaction.

Here is a roundup of summertime trends, promotions and programs taking place in Mazda dealerships in different parts of the

country. Think about how these or similar ideas could influence the way you conduct business during the sunny season.

BUG SPRAY AND OIL CHANGES

Longer days spark a very specific type of migration into dealerships - the "Pre-Vacation Preparedness Movement." People who might otherwise be reluctant to pay for preventive maintenance or would just as soon live with minor car problems have a radical change of heart when they think about packing up the kids for a trek across the country.

They decide they might as well have it all done - the tune-up, the oil change, the tire rotation and "Could you check the brakes while you're at it?" They suddenly remember what the air conditioner is for but can't recall when they last had it checked (and it does get hot at the Grand Canyon).

Vince La Croix, service manager at Walser Mazda in Richfield, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, notes that Minnesotans are religious about preventive summer maintenance.



"We had gifts and giveaways, and we covered everything, bumper to bumper."

Tom McEvoy, service manager, Northgate Mazda, St. Louis, Mo.

ance. "People here tend to plan ahead and get their vehicles ready for the summer," he says.

For quick vacations, most locals pack up the car, hitch up the boat and head to one of the many lakes within easy driving distance. "They only have a limited amount of time available for summer vacation, and they don't want to spend it having car trouble," Vince says. Walser Mazda's service department's business picks up by as much as 50 percent during the summer months. Starting in May, technicians come in an hour early and stay an hour late to get the work

done, a common practice in dealerships across the country.

Vince says Mazda's spring and summer Auto Fitness coupons also bring in a lot of customers. "People are very responsive to the coupons. We get a fantastic return."

Eighty-five percent of Mazda dealers now participate in Auto Fitness, a customized parts and service direct-mail program. Each quarter, participating dealers select five parts and service discount offers from a menu of 17 choices. Popular summer-quarter choices include air conditioning system flushing and charging, tune-ups and oil changes. The selected coupons are then sent out to Mazda owners in each dealer's market area.

PROMOTE, PROMOTE, PROMOTE!

St. Louis, home of the famous arch, the "Gateway to the West," cooks up temperatures in the 90-to 105-degree range in the summer. Vacationers escape the heat by spending time on rivers, lakes and in the Ozark mountains, a four- to five-hour drive away. Even so, the extreme heat takes its toll on vehicles.

Tom McEvoy, service manager at Northgate Mazda in St. Louis, starts promoting summer service early to would-be vacationers. "Starting in March, I staple a 20-

point Summer Inspection sheet that I designed myself to every R.O. coming through the department."

The technician does a thorough diagnostic of the car and checks off any items that might need attention during the summer. Then the service advisor explains the sheet and the recommended service to the customer, saying, for example, "If you're planning to go on vacation or do a lot of driving this summer, we recommend that you replace your front brake pads and get a new set of tires." This program has worked very well, Tom points out.

Another trend that heralds the coming of summer in certain parts of the country is the "Great Miata Reappearance." Northgate Mazda helped celebrate the Reappearance in May by inviting the local chapter of the Miata Club of America to the dealership for a Miata technical session. Twenty Club members and several drop-in guests were on hand to learn about care and maintenance of their Miatas from top Northgate technicians and staff.

"We had gifts and giveaways, and we covered everything, bumper to bumper," Tom says.

This included care of the rear window, oil changes, and other maintenance features. "Our lot was full of Miatas; it was pretty eye-catching." As a result of the session, the dealership sold two Miatas, more than \$300 worth of accessories and gained two new Miata service customers that day.

So far, Northgate's summer business has been great. The dealership's location near major Interstate highways means easy access for thousands of summer travellers. Tom takes advantage of his proximity to tourist areas by writing a letter about the dealership and service department and supplying it to local hotels and motels.

The hotel or motel staff insert the letter into a folder at the front desk along with the restaurant information. "It doesn't cost us anything and we get a lot of work from it," he says. Northgate is also planning a summer "Ladies Night" in the service department, a two-hour car clinic for women, by invitation only.

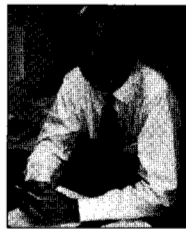
DISNEYLAND DELUGE

While vacationers in other parts of the country scatter into wide open spaces, summer visitors to southern California and central Florida crowd like lemmings into the two massive Disney resorts. This means high

for more summer customer-handling tips.)

In June, Jim primes his staff for the coming summer influx. "We have a conference and pump-up rally," he says. "I tell them that the days are getting longer, it's heating up and we're in for a busy summer." Irvine

Mazda emphasizes a customer service approach, striving to be the "Nordstrom" of dealerships. "The important thing is to get customers on their way to Disneyland, or



"We work hard to adopt a 'no problem' attitude...."

Jim Drinville, service manager, Irvine Mazda, Irvine, Calif.

wherever they're headed, with as little hassle as possible."

Bill Brown Mazda in Orlando, Florida is in a similar situation, with a tremendous tourist trade due to Walt Disney World, dozens of major hotels and other attractions in the area. Orlando is also a rapidly growing city, with extensive development underway. "We have a large wholesale parts business and we're pretty steady all year," says Jerry Swank, Parts Manager. "But it does pick up in the summer. It increases because of tourists, resident families who go on activity for nearby dealerships and service departments. "What I notice about our customers in the summer is that tempers are more likely to flare," says Jim Drinville, service manager at Irvine Mazda in California. Irvine Mazda is near two major north-south freeways between Los Angeles and San Diego and endures a crush of summer breakdowns and overheaters every year. "We work hard to adopt a 'no problem' attitude because people are hot and upset about their cars breaking down on their vacations." (See sidebar

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Soothing Hot and Bothered Customers

Customers can get irritable any time of the year, but there's something about hot weather and stalled vacation plans that can really set things off. As Jim Drinville of Irvine Mazda suggests, take a hint from successful Caribbean vacation resorts and use the words "no problem" as your customer-handling mantra.

For "no problem" to be effective, the words must be followed up with action. After assuring customers that their needs will be met, no problem, follow these steps:

If possible, get people out and enjoying the day right away. This might mean moving an emergency-service customer ahead of other, more routine service jobs (be sure to contact the other customers to explain), expediting paperwork, or otherwise speeding up the sales or service process.

Do what you can to keep folks cool and comfortable. Young children and older adults can be especially uncomfortable in hot weather. You can offer cold drinks, suggest that customers cool off in an air condi-

tioned office or waiting room, or even send them down the street to a coffee shop while you take care of the problem for them.

Demonstrate that you care about their predicament. Ruined vacation plans can be very stressful, and sometimes customers might want to unload their frustrations on you. Let them vent, then defuse their anger with statements like, "I can understand how frustrating this must be for you..." or "I'm really sorry this happened. We'll do everything we can..." Then be sure to follow through.

Turning Summer Shoppers Into Buyers

Each year, dealerships nationwide spend millions of dollars on summer promotions and events to bring in customers. However, as the saying goes, hayrides and hot dogs don't sell cars; people do.

Salespeople can maximize the effectiveness of a promotional event by consciously "working" the lot. This doesn't mean trying to hard-sell innocent bystanders, but it does mean devising creative ways to interest people in Mazda vehicles, the dealership and you. Consider the following:

Don't Be a Wallflower – This is no time to be shy. Get out among the guests. Offer to get them food and drinks. Ask them how they found out about the event. Get a conversation going and find out what they want.

Offer a Quick Tour – Take customers through the service and parts department, the showroom, the delivery area, etc. Point out any awards your dealership has received. Show them where your office is. Point out Mazda's hot new models, open the vehicle doors and let them and the kids get in.

Offer Demo Drives – People don't always like to ask if they aren't actively looking for a new vehicle, but demonstration drives help sell more cars and trucks. Be sure you learn the best demo drive methods by watching the Mazda Presentation Skills video.

Invite Them to Future Events – If your dealership sponsors car clinics or other customer-oriented events, invite them (write the date on the back of your business card).

Most important, ask for the prospect's name and telephone number and follow up on a regular basis. It may take a week, a month, or a year, but the prospect will eventually buy from someone he or she knows. In addition, you'll probably receive a lot of referral business along the way.

vacations while the kids are out of school, and students getting ready to go away to college at the end of the summer."

This spring, freak hailstorms in Florida caused a large increase in the dealership's parts business that will probably last all through the summer. Two back-to-back storms launched stones as large as baseballs that

destroyed car and truck hoods, fenders, roof panels and windshields and sent thousands of cars into Orlando body shops for extensive repairs. Some of the body shops supplied by Bill Brown Mazda are booked up through October.

The dealership tends to steer away from doing parts specials in the summer months. "We

have all the business we can handle," Jerry says. "We do a lot more direct mail and other promotions during the months when things slow down."

THE SELLING SEASON

Hotly promoted summer car sales are as American as watermelon at a Fourth of July picnic. Search lights streak across warm summer skies and balloon banners festoon dealerships from coast to coast.

Customers are lured by bands, hot dogs and soft drinks, pony rides for the kids and a general curiosity about "What are those car people doing now?!"

Dave Rosenberg, general manager for Ira Mazda in Danvers, Massachusetts, 20 minutes north of Boston, admits that not all summer customers are there to close a deal. "We get a lot more shoppers in the summer," he says. "People might not be ready to buy right away, but it's nice out and they like to be out walking around and looking at cars and trucks. In the winter, if people are out there in the freezing cold, you know they're not just shopping, they're serious."

Ira Mazda plans to shake off the famous New England winter chill with a major three- to four-day summer sales event featuring entertainment like cheerleading competitions, sporting events, hot dogs, popcorn, a band, raffles and prizes.

The event is really something special for the dealership because, for the rest of the year, most business is conducted indoors. "In wintertime, most of our business comes on Saturdays or Sundays," Dave says. "There's very little night business because it's dark and 25 degrees. During the summer, people are out golfing or going to the beach during the day, so they come in at night

after dinner. We sell 80 percent of our vehicles during the last few hours of our workday – from 6 p.m. until the last customer leaves."

Irvine Mazda throws "Western Days," a week of western wear, country western music, food and good deals for its customers. The auto center where the dealership is located spends about \$100,000 on the event, which also includes hayrides, a chili cookoff and, of course, heavy advertising.

This year, results were pretty good – sales were increased by 10–11 cars over a normal week for the dealership. The cowboy theme works because it's very unique for the area; it's almost the opposite of the strait-laced urban Orange County environment.

While sales for all types of Mazdas tend to be strong in summer, there are undeniable trends. Sports car and MPV sales tend to accelerate with the heat. Dave Rosenberg of Ira Mazda sums it up this way: "Miatas didn't sell here all winter, and now they're the hottest properties in the world." The new 626, MX-6 and RX-7, introduced in late spring, will also generate a lot of excitement throughout the summer selling season.

As these examples show, savvy dealers and dealership personnel are making the most of summer car shopping and servicing trends and having some fun as well. Clearly, the success of any plan or event depends on you and how you treat the customers who come through the door. While summer promotions should be as well thought-out as any other dealership program, take advantage of the season and live it up! Your customers will be glad you did. ●