

Auto Trader Gains Measurable Sales Results from Miller Heiman

Auto Trader have helped their customers make more money, their salespeople improve their professionalism and the company improve its bottom line by £1¼ million as a result of implementing Miller Heiman's Conceptual Selling® process.

When it comes to buying and selling motor vehicles in the UK, more people choose to buy and read Auto Trader than any other motoring title. A circulation of over 350,000, with thirteen regional editions, the magazine's combination of local targeting and national coverage has established it as the market leader. Today Auto Trader is one of 70 titles published by the Trader Media Group, a member of the Guardian Media Group. Auto Trader also has an outstanding automotive website and internet service attracting some 2.3 million users per month.

The problem: the need for change

Growth in internet advertising, combined with exciting and challenging increases in Auto Trader sales revenues were key drivers of change. To manage customer relationships more effectively, Auto Trader re-organised its sales force. A National Accounts division was created, and a dedicated team established to deal with internet advertising for car dealers and manufacturers, complementing the market leadership of the magazines.

This team, the New Media Group, were the first to be involved with Miller Heiman as Head of Sales Paul Shoemsmith recalls: "The company had set some ambitious sales targets to increase advertising revenues two or three fold year-on-year. In order to achieve our growth plans it was clear that we needed to have a much better understanding of our customers' business needs and how to meet them.

"There was no systematic approach in place and we felt that the time was right to invest in the professionalism of the sales force. We wanted to bring in a sales process, based on a market-leading brand, that could be applied consistently in every situation. We also needed to track the results."

Paul Shoemsmith attended a workshop on Conceptual Selling® run by Academy Partners LLP, a sales consultancy with 15 years experience of implementing Miller Heiman and knew instantly that they had found the solution they were looking for. "The process was fantastic and sold itself," he said.

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The Solution

The entire New Media sales team has been trained in Conceptual Selling®. This focuses on establishing what the car dealer or manufacturer is trying to accomplish, fix or avoid before discussing and agreeing the right solution. The aim: to maximise the value to customer and Auto Trader of each sales call. The programme has instilled the discipline of using the Green Sheet call plan to think through in advance the key elements of the call.

Conceptual Selling® is now built in to the sales approach, says Shoemith. At a regular review meeting following the training, the sales managers decided that each member of their team should run the full call planning process on their top 5 calls of the week. “Every Monday each sales manager runs an hour long session, where a salesperson presents one of their five Green Sheets. Everyone in the team is involved in reviewing the completed Green Sheet, including remote Field Executives phoning in, and we all learn from the process of taking it apart and rebuilding it.”

Supervisors then track the outcome of the sales calls made based on the Green Sheets to determine whether it can be attributed to the programme.

These weekly review meetings are proving extremely valuable and helping to build team spirit. Paul appreciates that some people take to the common sales language and process like ducks to water, whilst others will take time before the new culture is ingrained. The whole team is working towards that goal and has a practical framework for action and a defined timescale for reviewing progress.

Immediate impact

In terms of motivation and results, Miller Heiman made an immediate impact. It's a measure of Conceptual Selling's power that straight after the first workshop, several sales people rang Paul enthusing about the course.

“Typically sales people have a jaundiced view of training. They think the ideas are all old hat and don't apply to them, and they tend to file away the course notes instead of acting on them. But it was obvious that people were genuinely impressed by Miller Heiman: the ideas were new to them and they acknowledged that the process made them think about aspects they hadn't considered before.”

The team could also see for themselves that the methodology worked. One sales person immediately put it into practice, completing a Green Sheet for a particularly difficult dealer situation and being rewarded with a successful outcome. Another customer commented: “I feel that I have bought from you, rather than being sold to.”

The first measurable result came within a week of implementation. The team was convinced that applying the Miller Heiman techniques directly led to securing a deal worth £45K that effectively covered the cost of the training. Since then many more wins have been attributed to the system.

These are seen as 3 way wins: to the customer, who buys a better solution because it helps sell more cars; to the salesperson, whose credibility, self-esteem and results rise through making a better contribution to the customer's business; and to Auto Trader, who have seen a fivefold return on their investment. The successes are logged and included in reports to the main board, to support recommendations that the process is extended to other parts of the Group.

By mid 2005, Auto Trader had extended the processes to include National Accounts and National Magazines divisions, and cross-trained a total of 6 Sales Managers as Client Associates licensed to deliver Strategic Selling[®] and LAMP[®] (Large Account Management Processsm) in addition to Conceptual Selling[®]. Auto Trader shows strong top-down commitment to the Miller Heiman process with senior managers attending workshops and follow-up review sessions.

The process does not stand alone, but forms part of the Sales Academy, a career progression programme designed by the Manager of HR and Training Trecilla Lobo, which includes a curriculum of skills training and sales processes from sales induction to senior sales management.

The intention is for the methodology to become part of the standard induction process for all new sales recruits is further proof of Auto Trader's long term commitment to serving its customers.
