

2026 BUYER'S GUIDE

Automotive Digital Marketing Buyer's Guide

Dealer websites, SEO, PPC, inventory ads, AI, CRM, CDP, reputation, attribution and vendor selection.

Dealer marketing stack

Website

SEO

PPC

Inventory

CRM

CDP

AI

Reputation

Attribution

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2026 Automotive Digital Marketing Buyer's Guide

Dealer website platforms, SEO, PPC, inventory ads, AI, CRM, CDP, reputation, attribution and vendor selection for dealerships and dealer groups.

Purpose

This guide helps dealership owners, GMs, dealer group marketing leaders and vendor buyers evaluate the modern automotive marketing stack before they sign, renew or replace vendors.

Published by	Automotive Digital Marketing
Audience	Dealership owners, GMs, dealer group marketing leaders, OEM program teams, automotive SaaS vendors, agencies and strategic buyers
Best used for	Vendor calls, RFPs, renewals, platform changes, agency evaluations, first-party data strategy and AI governance reviews
Version	PDF v1.0

Disclaimer

This guide is for educational and planning purposes only. It is not legal, financial, advertising-compliance or privacy advice. Dealerships should review advertising, pricing, privacy, data, AI, consumer-disclosure and contract practices with qualified counsel and internal compliance leaders before changing vendor agreements, pricing language, data-sharing practices or AI workflows.



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Recommended workflow

Start with the stack map to identify your bottleneck. Then use the scorecard, RFP questions and 90-day rollout plan before any vendor renewal, platform migration or agency switch.



SECTION 1

Executive Summary

The short version for dealership and vendor leadership.



Executive Summary

Automotive digital marketing is no longer a set of disconnected campaigns. For dealerships and dealer groups, it is now an operating stack that connects website performance, local search, paid media, inventory data, CRM follow-up, reputation, first-party data, AI workflows, attribution and source-to-sale reporting.

The financial stakes are large. NADA's 2025 financial profile reports 16,990 U.S. franchised light-vehicle dealers, 16.2 million light-duty vehicles sold, more than \$1.3 trillion in total dealership sales, more than 276 million repair orders, and service and parts sales exceeding \$164 billion. NADA also reports about \$9.96 billion in total dealership advertising expenditures and an average advertising expense of \$586,246 per dealership. Those numbers make vendor selection a major budget and operating decision, not just a marketing preference. [1]

The buyer journey also requires a connected stack. Cox Automotive's 2025 Car Buyer Journey release reports that digital efficiency, AI-powered assistance and smoother buying workflows are tied to higher satisfaction. The practical lesson is not that every dealership should chase every AI product. The lesson is that website, ads, inventory, CRM, chat, handoff and reporting need to preserve shopper context across online and in-store steps. [2]

Five questions before signature

Who owns the accounts, data, audiences, feeds, tracking and creative assets? How does the platform connect website, inventory, CRM, CDP, AI and attribution? How are compliance risks governed? What exactly happens in the first 90 days? How cleanly can the dealership exit with data, reports, accounts and history intact?

This guide helps dealership decision-makers evaluate the modern marketing stack before they sign, renew or replace vendors.

How to Use This Guide

Use this guide before a vendor call, RFP, renewal conversation, platform migration or agency change.

- Single rooftop: start with the Dealer Marketing Stack Map and identify the biggest bottleneck: weak traffic, weak lead quality, poor website conversion, CRM follow-up gaps, reputation issues, fixed-ops leakage, unclear attribution or vendor confusion.
- Dealer group: start with the Vendor Selection Scorecard and First 90-Day Rollout Plan. Multi-rooftop decisions usually fail when account ownership, reporting definitions, CRM fields, inventory feeds and compliance processes differ by store.
- OEM program team or vendor buyer: use the Strategic Buyer Context section to understand where dealership marketing value is consolidating.

The Dealer Marketing Stack Became an Operating System

The old dealership marketing question was simple: 'Who can bring more leads?' The 2026 question is broader: 'Who can connect shopper demand, inventory, website conversion, CRM follow-up, first-party data, reputation, compliance and source-to-sale reporting in one accountable operating model?'

Step	Layer	What should happen
1	Discovery	The shopper finds the dealership through organic search, paid search, maps, listings, social, video, CTV, marketplace exposure, email, referral traffic or brand demand.
2	Landing path	The shopper lands on a homepage, SRP, VDP, service page, finance page, offer page, trade-in flow, review profile, chat experience or digital retailing tool.
3	Identity and intent	The dealership captures identity, vehicle interest, source, intent, communication preference and next action.
4	Follow-up	CRM, email, SMS, AI chat, BDC, sales team, service team and lifecycle systems continue the conversation.
5	Measurement	Reporting connects spend to calls, forms, chats, appointments, showroom visits, sold units, service appointments, repair orders, retention and revenue.

The most expensive marketing mistake in 2026 is not always overspending. It is buying isolated activity without operating controls. Fragmented vendors can make a budget look active while leaving weak measurement, duplicate spend, poor source mapping, unclear account ownership and low CRM discipline.



A better vendor relationship defines how the whole chain works: traffic source, landing path, conversion event, CRM writeback, reporting field, follow-up workflow, dealership accountability and executive reporting.



SECTION 2

Key Market Signals

Evidence that dealership marketing is a recurring operating-budget category.



Key Market Signals

Use these signals as context, not automatic ROI claims. Each dealership should validate results through its own source-to-sale and source-to-service reporting.

1 Dealer advertising is a large recurring budget category.

Signal

NADA reports about \$9.96B in 2025 dealer ad spend and \$586,246 average ad expense per store.

Dealer implication

Vendor choice governs a major annual expense line.

Platform buyer implication

Platforms close to ad spend, attribution and dealer workflows can carry strategic value.

2 Dealership operations are large and recurring.

Signal

NADA reports \$1.3T+ in sales, 276M+ repair orders and \$164B+ in service and parts sales.

Dealer implication

Marketing affects sales, service, retention and fixed ops.

Platform buyer implication

Vendors that connect sales and service lifecycle data become more valuable.

3 AI and digital tools are influencing satisfaction.

Signal

Cox Automotive reported high satisfaction among shoppers using AI-powered online tools.

Dealer implication

AI should be evaluated as workflow support, not hype.

Platform buyer implication

AI tools gain value when linked to inventory, CRM, identity and measurement.

4 Vehicle ads depend on feed infrastructure.

Signal

Google vehicle ads rely on inventory details such as make, model, price, mileage and advertiser name.

Dealer implication

Feed quality affects ad efficiency and shopper trust.

Platform buyer implication

Feed normalization and inventory-aware ads create platform defensibility.

5 First-party data is central to measurement.

Signal

Google Customer Match and enhanced conversions support first-party activation and offline conversion measurement.

Dealer implication

Dealers need account ownership, consent discipline and offline conversion governance.

Platform buyer implication

CDP, CRM and attribution vendors become more strategically important.

6 Pricing and advertising compliance remain active risks.

Signal

FTC warned 97 dealer groups about advertised prices, required fees and actual prices charged.

Dealer implication

Compliance must be built into ads, offers, pages and AI workflows.

Platform buyer implication

Compliance-aware systems reduce enterprise risk for dealer groups and acquirers.

7 AI governance is becoming an operating requirement.

Signal

NIST's Generative AI Profile helps organizations identify generative AI risks and controls.

Dealer implication

Dealers need AI guardrails before automated messaging scales.

Platform buyer implication

AI vendors with auditability and governance controls become more credible.

8 M&A; validates integrated AI/CDP/lifecycle interest.

Signal

Cox announced an agreement to acquire Fullpath, adding CDP, marketing automation and AI capabilities.

Dealer implication

Dealer technology is moving toward integrated data and automation.

Platform buyer implication

Strategic buyers value platforms close to identity, automation and measurement.

9 AI sales and lifecycle automation are consolidating.

Signal

Impel announced the acquisition of Outsell in a transaction described as more than \$100M cash plus equity.

Dealer implication

Lifecycle automation is becoming part of the dealer marketing stack.

Platform buyer implication



AI + CRM + lifecycle vendors are attractive strategic assets.



SECTION 3

Dealer Marketing Stack Map

What to evaluate by stack area before choosing vendors.



Dealer Marketing Stack Map

The stack map turns a vague vendor conversation into a practical due-diligence checklist. The goal is to match each vendor's strengths to the dealership's actual bottleneck.


Stack area	Buyer goal	Vendor questions	Red flags	KPIs
Website platform	Convert shoppers, preserve inventory context, support SEO, compliance and CRM handoff.	Who owns the domain, analytics, tags, forms, content and event data? How fast are SRPs and VDPs?	Locked templates, weak VDP speed, generic lead sources, limited export rights.	VDP views, form rate, call rate, chat rate, mobile speed, organic sessions.
Dealer SEO	Build durable visibility for sales, service, finance, trade-in, local and model demand.	Which pages will be created or improved in the first 90 days? How are GBP, schema, internal links and technical fixes handled?	Thin pages, duplicated OEM copy, generic monthly reports, no technical backlog.	Non-brand clicks, organic leads, service leads, map actions, indexed strategic pages.
Paid search	Capture high-intent demand with accountable spend.	Who owns Google Ads? Are offline conversions imported? How are campaigns split by rooftop, department and market?	Vendor-owned accounts, lead-count-only reporting, no negative keyword process.	Cost per qualified lead, cost per appointment, sold units, cost per sold unit.
Inventory ads	Match ads to live VINs, pricing, availability and margin priorities.	How often does the feed refresh? How are sold, inbound, CPO, EV, aged and high-priority units handled?	Stale VINs, mismatched prices, weak image QA, no feed-error reporting.	Feed approval rate, VIN coverage, VDP sessions, vehicle leads, aged-unit movement.
Social / video / CTV	Build awareness, retarget shoppers and support model, event and service demand.	What audiences, creative, placements, frequency caps and lift measures are used?	View metrics without action metrics, generic creative, weak exclusions.	Reach, frequency, engaged visits, VDP return visits, assisted leads.
Reputation	Improve trust, review volume, response quality and local profile performance.	How are reviews requested, routed, responded to and audited for policy compliance?	Incentivized reviews, selective solicitation, employee quotas, profile access chaos.	Review count, rating trend, response time, GBP actions, complaint resolution time.
CRM / email / SMS	Convert demand into appointments, sales, service retention and repeat engagement.	How are sources mapped? How are duplicates handled? What lifecycle campaigns run by segment?	Generic sources, poor opt-out handling, unreviewed templates.	Response speed, contact rate, appointment set, show rate, sold rate.
CDP / first-party data	Resolve identity, build segments, improve personalization and measurement.	Which systems feed the profile? Who owns the data? How are consent, deletion, export and audience activation handled?	Black-box identity, unclear consent, no export rights, no match-rate reporting.	Matched profiles, audience growth, match rate, segment performance.
AI chat / AI marketing	Improve response, routing, personalization, task prioritization and lifecycle execution.	What data does the AI use? What topics are restricted? Are transcripts auditable?	Invented pricing, unsupported payment claims, no logs, no human escalation.	Qualified conversations, appointment set, human handoff rate, transcript audit score.
Attribution / reporting	Connect spend to outcomes across channels and rooftops.	Can reporting show source-to-sale and source-to-service performance by rooftop and department?	Lead-only dashboards, inconsistent definitions, missing CRM outcomes.	Cost per opportunity, cost per sale, sold units by source, executive report delivery.



SECTION 4

Vendor Selection Scorecard

Turn vendor selection from a sales-pitch contest into a weighted decision.



Vendor Selection Scorecard

Use this scorecard before signing, renewing or replacing a vendor. Score each category from 1 to 5, multiply by the weight, and compare the weighted total. A strong vendor should score highly in the categories tied to your current bottleneck.

Criterion	Weight	What to evaluate	Evidence to request
Dealer specialization	12%	Automotive references, OEM program experience, inventory logic, fixed-ops knowledge and dealer group reporting ability.	Dealer-specific examples, sample roadmap, rooftop case scenario.
Data / account ownership	15%	Dealer-owned ad accounts, analytics, GBP, Merchant Center/feed access, tags, call tracking, creative, reports and exports.	Written ownership map and exit checklist.
Integration depth	13%	CRM, DMS where applicable, inventory, website, chat, call tracking, email, SMS, CDP, analytics and offline conversion import.	Integration diagram and field-level mapping.
Reporting quality	13%	Source-to-sale, source-to-service, rooftop roll-up, duplicate handling and qualified-opportunity reporting.	Sample executive report and definitions glossary.
Inventory awareness	10%	VIN-level feed QA, pricing consistency, availability rules, aged inventory logic and segmentation.	Feed audit report and sample inventory campaign structure.
CRM alignment	10%	Source mapping, lead routing, appointment tracking, sales-stage reporting, lifecycle campaigns and BDC workflow.	CRM source mapping and first-90-day CRM plan.
Compliance / governance	10%	Pricing claims, rebate logic, disclaimers, review policy, AI guardrails, audit logs, privacy and approval records.	Compliance workflow and escalation policy.
First-90-day execution	9%	Dated onboarding plan, tracking cleanup, feed audit, GBP audit, campaign rebuild, content fixes and reporting setup.	Week-by-week implementation plan.
Contract / exit terms	8%	Termination rights, export rights, transition support, account access, data deletion, creative ownership and renewal notice.	Exit clause, export sample and transition SLA.



Weighted score	Interpretation
90-100	Strong candidate if the vendor's strongest capabilities match the dealership bottleneck.
80-89	Serious candidate; inspect weak categories before contract.
70-79	Narrow specialist or risky generalist; require stronger proof.
Below 70	Do not proceed unless the vendor solves one urgent, narrow problem with clear exit terms.



SECTION 5

Channel Evaluation Playbooks

Questions, red flags and evidence requests by vendor category.



Channel Evaluation Playbooks

Website platform

A dealer website platform should be evaluated as the dealership's conversion and data-control layer. It affects SEO, speed, SRPs, VDPs, finance paths, service pages, event tracking, compliance and CRM handoff.

Questions to ask	Red flags
Who owns the domain, analytics, tags, content, design files, form data and event history?	The vendor owns too much of the account structure.
Can we export content, page data, lead data and event definitions if we leave?	VDP speed is treated as a design issue rather than a revenue issue.
How are SRP and VDP events tracked?	All leads arrive in CRM with generic source names.
How do you preserve vehicle, campaign and source context through forms, calls and chat?	The platform cannot show event definitions.
What website changes will you prioritize in the first 90 days?	Exit terms are unclear.

Dealer SEO

Dealer SEO should cover local visibility, service demand, city relevance, model demand, used inventory, trade-in pages, finance pages, fixed ops, schema, internal links, technical crawlability and content quality.

Questions to ask	Red flags
Which strategic pages will you build or improve first?	The strategy is mostly blog posts.
How will you handle Google Business Profile, service pages and city/model relevance?	Reports show rankings but not commercial outcomes.
What technical issues will you audit?	Local SEO and fixed ops are ignored.
How will SEO connect to calls, forms and service leads?	No crawl or indexation plan exists.
What does a useful monthly SEO report look like?	Content is copied from OEM or syndicated sources without differentiation.

Paid search

Paid search should capture high-intent demand, but it should not be judged by clicks alone. Enhanced conversions for leads can connect imported offline conversions back to ad campaigns using hashed first-party data. [5]

Questions to ask	Red flags
Who owns the Google Ads account?	The vendor reports only clicks, CTR and lead volume.
Which conversions are primary and which are secondary?	The dealer cannot access the ad account.
Are offline conversions imported from CRM?	Negative keyword discipline is weak.
How are campaigns separated by brand, non-brand, service, model, competitor, remarketing and rooftop?	Calls are counted without quality review.
How do you measure qualified opportunities, not just leads?	Landing pages do not match search intent.

Inventory ads

Inventory advertising depends on feed quality. Google vehicle ads can show vehicle details such as make, model, price, mileage and advertiser name. [3]

Questions to ask	Red flags
How often does the feed refresh?	Stale inventory appears in ads.
What happens when a vehicle is sold, pending, inbound or unavailable?	Pricing is inconsistent across systems.
How are price changes reflected across website, feed, ads and showroom documentation?	Vehicle images are poor or missing.
How are aged units, CPO, EVs, service loaners and high-margin inventory segmented?	Feed errors are not reported.
Can we see feed errors and VIN-level performance?	There is no inventory segmentation strategy.

CRM, email and SMS

CRM and lifecycle marketing determine whether marketing demand becomes revenue. A dealership can have strong traffic and still lose performance through slow response, poor routing, weak templates, duplicate leads or incomplete source mapping.

Questions to ask	Red flags
How are lead sources mapped?	CRM sources are generic.
How are duplicate leads handled?	Email and SMS templates are not reviewed.
What happens after a lead is submitted?	Opt-out compliance is unclear.
Which lifecycle segments exist?	Reporting stops at lead count.
How are appointment rate, show rate and sold rate reported by source?	Sales feedback does not return to marketing.

CDP and first-party data

A dealer CDP or first-party data platform should help the dealership resolve identity, build segments, activate audiences and improve reporting. Customer Match supports the broader importance of first-party data because it uses online and offline customer data to reach and re-engage customers across Google surfaces. [4]

Questions to ask	Red flags
Which systems feed the customer profile?	The vendor cannot explain identity resolution.
What identity fields are used?	Consent assumptions are vague.
Who owns the data?	No export rights exist.
Can the dealer export profiles, audiences and activity history?	Match quality is not reported.
How are consent, deletion, suppression and audience activation handled?	The platform is a black box.

AI chat and AI marketing

AI can support chat, lead routing, email timing, customer segmentation, content workflows, sales task prioritization and lifecycle marketing. AI needs governance before scale. [7]

Questions to ask	Red flags
What data does the AI use?	AI invents price, availability or payment details.
What topics are restricted?	No transcript audit exists.
Are transcripts auditable?	CRM writeback is uncontrolled.
What pricing, finance, availability and compliance guardrails exist?	Human escalation is weak.
How does the AI hand off to humans?	The vendor cannot explain model governance.
What can be exported if we leave?	

Reputation

Reputation management affects local trust, Google Business Profile performance and shopper confidence. Review solicitation needs policy-safe workflows and controlled profile access. [10]



Questions to ask	Red flags
How are reviews requested?	Review incentives are offered.
How are negative reviews escalated?	Only happy customers are asked for reviews.
Who owns profile access?	Employees are pressured to generate reviews.
Are review requests policy-safe?	Profile access is not controlled.
How is response quality measured?	Responses are generic or delayed.



SECTION 6

Execution and Procurement Tools

RFP questions, 90-day rollout, budget planning and reporting templates.



First 90-Day Vendor Rollout Plan

A strong vendor can describe what happens before full performance results appear. Use this plan to turn vendor selection into execution discipline.

Period	Dealer goal	Vendor actions	Dealer inputs	Output
Days 1-15	Establish access and baseline.	Collect account access, audit website, CRM, feeds, GBP, analytics, tags, ads, reporting and contracts.	Goals, vendor list, rooftops, access, CRM exports, inventory priorities, compliance rules.	Baseline audit and risk list.
Days 16-30	Fix measurement and obvious friction.	Validate tracking, source mapping, call tracking, forms, feed errors, GBP access and landing paths.	Approval process, compliance review, lead-handling notes, store-level priorities.	Measurement cleanup plan and first fixes.
Days 31-60	Rebuild priority execution.	Adjust campaigns, fix landing pages, improve key SEO pages, segment inventory, refine CRM workflows.	Inventory priorities, sales feedback, fixed-ops priorities, creative approvals.	Channel execution roadmap and early performance signals.
Days 61-90	Review quality and decide next quarter.	Analyze lead quality, calls, appointments, show rate, sold outcomes, service contribution and reporting gaps.	CRM outcome feedback, appointment data, sold data, service data where available.	90-day performance review and next-quarter plan.

RFP Question Bank

Use these questions in vendor calls, formal RFPs or renewal reviews. The goal is to force clarity before price and contract terms dominate the conversation.

Category	Questions
Company and specialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What dealership problems do you solve better than a general marketing provider? <input type="checkbox"/> Which dealer types are your best fit: single rooftop, dealer group, OEM program, used-car store, fixed-ops-heavy store, luxury, volume, domestic or import? <input type="checkbox"/> Which services are performed in-house, and which are outsourced? <input type="checkbox"/> What would make you say we are not a good fit?
Ownership and exit rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Who owns ad accounts, analytics, tags, call tracking, creative, landing pages, reports and customer data? <input type="checkbox"/> What can we export if the relationship ends? <input type="checkbox"/> What happens to tracking numbers, tags, audiences, campaigns and creative after termination? <input type="checkbox"/> How much notice is required before renewal or cancellation?
Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Can you show a sample report tied to business outcomes? <input type="checkbox"/> How do you define a qualified opportunity? <input type="checkbox"/> Can reporting show calls, forms, chats, appointments, show rate and sold rate by source? <input type="checkbox"/> Can reports roll up across rooftops and departments?
Integrations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Which CRM, inventory, website, call tracking, chat, CDP, email/SMS and analytics integrations are native? <input type="checkbox"/> Which integrations require custom work? <input type="checkbox"/> How are source fields mapped? <input type="checkbox"/> How are duplicate leads handled?
Compliance and governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> How are pricing claims, rebates, disclaimers and offer pages reviewed? <input type="checkbox"/> How are reviews requested and monitored? <input type="checkbox"/> How are AI transcripts logged? <input type="checkbox"/> What human review and escalation rules exist? <input type="checkbox"/> Who approves ad copy, landing pages, AI prompts and customer-facing templates?
AI and data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What data does your AI use? <input type="checkbox"/> Does customer data train shared models? <input type="checkbox"/> Can we opt out of model training? <input type="checkbox"/> Can we audit AI outputs and transcripts? <input type="checkbox"/> How are hallucinations, pricing errors and compliance-sensitive claims handled?

Budget Planning Framework

This guide does not prescribe exact spend levels because dealership markets, rooftops, inventory, fixed-ops goals, OEM rules and competition vary. Instead, use budget planning to match spend to the bottleneck.

Dealership situation	Budget emphasis	What to inspect first
Low non-brand visibility	SEO, local search, service pages, GBP, model/city pages.	Indexed pages, non-brand clicks, local map actions, service leads.
High spend but weak lead quality	PPC structure, landing pages, call tracking, offline conversions.	Campaign segmentation, negative keywords, CRM source quality.
Traffic but low conversion	Website CRO, SRPs, VDPs, mobile speed, forms, calls, chat.	VDP conversion, call rate, form friction, mobile experience.
Leads but weak sales outcomes	CRM routing, response speed, appointment process, BDC workflow.	Contact rate, appointment set, show rate, sold rate.
Weak retention / fixed ops	Email, SMS, service reminders, lifecycle marketing, customer data.	Service defection, reactivation campaigns, repeat purchase path.
Vendor confusion	RFP, scorecard, data ownership, reporting sample, exit terms.	Account access, reporting definitions, contract clauses.

Budget principle

Do not allocate budget by channel habit alone. Allocate by bottleneck: visibility, lead quality, conversion, follow-up, retention, attribution or vendor fit.

Monthly Executive Reporting Template

A useful executive report should fit into a monthly leadership meeting. It should not require a marketing analyst to interpret.

Executive summary prompts

- What changed this month?
- Which channels improved?
- Which channels declined?
- What is the main bottleneck?
- What decision is needed from leadership?

Metric	This month	Previous month	Notes
Total spend			
Leads			
Qualified opportunities			
Calls			
Appointments set			
Appointment show rate			
Sold units by source			
Service appointments			
Cost per qualified opportunity			
Cost per sold unit			

Channel notes

- SEO
- Paid search
- Inventory ads
- Social/video
- Website conversion
- CRM/email/SMS
- Reputation
- AI/chat
- CDP/attribution

Compliance and AI Governance Checklist

Use this checklist with legal, compliance, sales and marketing leadership. It is not legal advice.

Advertising and pricing

Check	Status	Owner	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Advertised prices include required fees where applicable.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Offer terms, rebates and discounts are clear.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Vehicle availability is checked regularly.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Landing pages match ad claims.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Payment, APR, lease, down payment and term claims are reviewed.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Creative approval history is retained.			

Reviews and reputation


Check	Status	Owner	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Review requests are not incentivized.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Customers are not pressured to leave specific ratings.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Review requests are not selectively sent only to happy customers.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Employees are not assigned review quotas.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Profile access is controlled.			

AI governance

Check	Status	Owner	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Approved AI use cases are documented.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Prohibited topics are defined.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Human escalation rules are clear.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Pricing and payment guardrails exist.			
<input type="checkbox"/> AI transcripts are auditable.			
<input type="checkbox"/> CRM writeback rules are documented.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Customer data usage is disclosed and controlled.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Exit rights for prompts, workflows, logs and data are clear.			

Data and privacy

Check	Status	Owner	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Data sources are documented.			





Check	Status	Owner	Notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Customer Match / audience uploads are governed.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Offline conversion imports are reviewed.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Consent and suppression rules are documented.			
<input type="checkbox"/> Export and deletion rights are included in the contract.			



SECTION 7

Strategic Buyer Context

Why this category matters to platforms, AI vendors, CDPs
and PE-backed agency roll-ups.





Strategic Buyer Context

This section is written for automotive SaaS vendors, dealer marketing platforms, agency roll-ups and strategic acquirers. It should be treated as category context, not a valuation model.

Dealer website platforms

Website platforms sit at the point where inventory, SEO, paid traffic, chat, forms, calls, trade tools, service pages, compliance disclaimers and analytics meet. That makes the website platform a control layer for demand capture. Strategic value increases when the platform can prove fast VDPs, clean inventory feeds, flexible content, strong local SEO architecture, accessible reporting, CRM handoff quality, first-party event capture and group-level governance.

Automotive marketing platforms

Automotive marketing platforms gain leverage when they connect paid search, inventory ads, social, video, retargeting, reputation, website data and CRM outcomes. The diligence question is whether the platform controls a durable operating layer or mainly manages media through labor. NADA's dealership advertising data supports the economic importance of the category. [1]

AI chat and lifecycle vendors

AI chat and lifecycle vendors become more valuable when they connect real-time shopper behavior, inventory context, CRM status and next-best-action workflows. Cox's announced agreement to acquire Fullpath and Impel's acquisition of Outsell both point toward consolidation around AI, CDP, marketing automation and lifecycle engagement. [8][9]

CDP and attribution vendors

CDP and attribution vendors matter because dealerships need first-party data control, shopper identity resolution, audience activation and offline conversion measurement. Google Customer Match and enhanced conversions documentation support the operational need for first-party data, hashed matching and imported offline conversion governance. [4][5]

PE-backed agency roll-ups



PE-backed agency roll-ups need to distinguish services revenue from platform-controlled value. A roll-up built on low-integration campaign management faces churn, margin pressure and reporting inconsistency. A roll-up with shared data standards, dealer-specific playbooks, owned workflow tools, compliance process and unified reporting can create more durable value.



SECTION 8

Worksheet Pack

Printable templates for vendor calls, RFPs, reporting and implementation planning.



Worksheet Pack

Print these pages or copy them into a spreadsheet before vendor calls. The goal is to capture evidence, not impressions.

Worksheet 1: Vendor Selection Scorecard

Criterion	Weight	Score 1-5	Evidence requested	Vendor answer / notes
Dealer specialization	12%		Dealer-specific examples, sample roadmap, rooftop case scenario.	
Data / account ownership	15%		Written ownership map and exit checklist.	
Integration depth	13%		Integration diagram and field-level mapping.	
Reporting quality	13%		Sample executive report and definitions glossary.	
Inventory awareness	10%		Feed audit report and sample inventory campaign structure.	
CRM alignment	10%		CRM source mapping and first-90-day CRM plan.	
Compliance / governance	10%		Compliance workflow and escalation policy.	
First-90-day execution	9%		Week-by-week implementation plan.	
Contract / exit terms	8%		Exit clause, export sample and transition SLA.	

Worksheet 2: RFP Call Notes

Question	Answer	Evidence promised	Risk / follow-up
What dealership problems do you solve best?			
Who owns ad accounts, analytics, tags and data?			
How does source-to-sale reporting work?			
Which CRM, website, inventory and CDP integrations are native?			
What happens during the first 90 days?			
How are pricing, compliance and AI claims governed?			
What can be exported if the relationship ends?			

Worksheet 3: 90-Day Rollout Planner

Period	Action	Owner	Due date	Done
Days 1-15				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>
Days 16-30				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>
Days 31-60				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>
Days 61-90				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>

Worksheet 4: Monthly Executive Reporting Template

Metric	This month	Previous month	Change	Notes
Total spend				
Qualified opportunities				
Appointments set				
Show rate				
Sold units				
Cost per sold unit				
Service appointments				
Top bottleneck				
Decision needed				

Worksheet 5: Budget Planning Notes

Bottleneck	Current spend	Evidence	Next action
Visibility			
Lead quality			
Website conversion			
CRM follow-up			
Retention/fixed ops			
Attribution/reporting			

Worksheet 6: AI Governance Checklist



Area	Check	Owner	Status	Notes
AI	Approved use cases documented		[]	
AI	Restricted topics defined		[]	
AI	Human escalation rules clear		[]	
AI	Pricing/payment guardrails exist		[]	
AI	Transcripts auditable		[]	
AI	CRM writeback rules documented		[]	
AI	Customer data use disclosed		[]	
AI	Prompt/workflow/log export rights defined		[]	



SECTION 9

Source Notes

Where the guide's evidence comes from and what each source supports.



Source Notes

The guide uses NADA for dealership scale and advertising context, Cox Automotive for buyer-journey context, Google documentation for platform mechanics, FTC/NIST for compliance and AI governance framing, and public M&A/vendor sources for category signals.

No.	Source	Publisher	Used for	URL
1	NADA Data 2025: Annual Financial Profile of America's Franchised New-Car Dealerships	National Automobile Dealers Association	Dealership count, vehicle sales, total dealership sales, repair orders, service/parts sales, total dealership advertising expenditures, average advertising expense per dealership.	https://www.nada.org/media/4695
2	2025 Cox Automotive Car Buyer Journey Study Finds Efficiency, Digital Tools and AI Drive Record Satisfaction	Cox Automotive	Buyer-journey and satisfaction context, including digital efficiency and AI-assisted shopping context.	https://www.coxautoinc.com/insights/cox-automotive-car-buyer-journey-study-finds-efficiency-digital-tools-and-ai-drive-record-satisfaction/
3	About vehicle ads	Google Merchant Center Help	Vehicle ads and inventory promotion mechanics.	https://support.google.com/merchants/answer/15312145
4	About Customer Match	Google Ads Help	First-party data activation across Google surfaces.	https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/10010286
5	About enhanced conversions for leads	Google Ads Help	Hashed first-party customer data and imported offline conversion measurement.	https://support.google.com/google-ads/answer/15713840
6	FTC warns 97 auto dealership groups about deceptive pricing	Federal Trade Commission	Advertising and pricing compliance context; advertised prices and required fees.	https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2026/03/ftc-warns-97-auto-dealership-groups-about-deceptive-pricing
7	AI Risk Management Framework and Generative AI Profile	National Institute of Standards and Technology	AI governance framing and generative AI risk-management actions.	https://www.nist.gov/itl/ai-risk-management-framework
8	Cox Automotive to acquire Fullpath	PRNewswire / Cox Automotive	AI-native CDP, marketing automation and strategic platform consolidation context.	https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/cox-automotive-to-acquire-fullpath-bringing-ai-native-data-and-marketing-infrastructure-to-the-industrys-largest-dealer-network-302750703.html
9	Impel acquires Outsell	Impel	AI sales and marketing automation consolidation, dealer scale and transaction value context.	https://impel.ai/news/impel-acquires-automotive-customer-engagement-platform-outsell/
10	Business Profile policies: prohibited and restricted content	Google Business Profile Help	Review incentives, biased solicitation and review-content pressure policy context.	https://support.google.com/contributionpolicy/answer/7400114

Weak or uncertain claims to avoid

- Do not publish unsupported claims such as "automotive digital marketing software is a \$X billion market" unless the source methodology is clear.
- Do not claim "AI chat increases sales by X%" unless the claim is tied to dealer-specific proof or a named source with methodology.
- Do not claim CTV is the fastest-growing dealer channel without reliable benchmark data.
- Do not claim this guide is legally compliant or prevents FTC risk.
- Treat vendor and M&A sources as category signals, not proof of dealership performance.



Next asset to build

The companion worksheet pack can be released as spreadsheet templates: vendor scorecard, RFP checklist, 90-day rollout planner, budget worksheet, monthly report template and AI governance checklist.



FINAL

Ready for vendor calls

Use the scorecard before the sales pitch controls the decision. Keep accounts, data, feeds, reporting and exit terms in dealership control.

