

● THE DEALERSHIP DIGITAL MARKETING PLAYBOOK

Turn online research into **test drives** and sales.

A practical guide for car dealerships and automotive groups that want to reach local buyers, generate quality enquiries and turn them into test drives, sales and service bookings.



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Seen. Trusted. Chosen.

Drive.

● AUTOMOTIVE WHITEPAPER

The Dealership Digital Marketing Playbook

How car buyers research and choose a vehicle and a dealer today, and a practical plan to reach them at every stage, from first search to keys in hand.



Brandon Delardes, Founder, Base Digital · Brisbane · Published October 2026

INSIDE THIS PLAYBOOK

1. How car buyers research and decide
2. The buying journey, stage by stage
3. Five foundations of dealership marketing
4. A 12-month dealership marketing calendar
5. Multi-brand groups, locations and departments
6. Measuring what matters
7. The 20-point dealership checklist

1. How car buyers research and decide

Buying a car is one of the biggest purchases most people make, after a home. It mixes emotion with hard numbers, often involves a partner or family, and comes with practical questions about finance, trade-in and servicing.

Most of that research now happens online, over weeks rather than days. Before a buyer calls or walks into your showroom, they have usually compared models, read reviews, watched videos, checked prices across dealers and marketplaces, estimated their trade-in, looked at finance repayments and, increasingly, asked an AI assistant such as ChatGPT or Google's AI Overviews for advice.

The short version: by the time a buyer enquires, they have usually chosen the vehicle and narrowed the dealers to a few. Your marketing has to be present while they compare, and your team has to respond fast when they finally reach out.

What buyers are weighing up

Car buyers rarely make a single decision. They are choosing a vehicle, a dealer, a way to pay and what to do with their current car, and each brings its own questions.

- **The vehicle.** Model comparisons, specs, safety, running costs, reviews and whether a new, demo or used option makes more sense.
- **The price and finance.** Drive-away pricing, current offers, repayments and whether finance can be arranged through the dealer.
- **The trade-in.** What their current car is worth, and how easy the dealer makes the trade.
- **The dealer.** Location, reputation, reviews, stock availability, how quickly they respond and how they'll be treated after the sale.

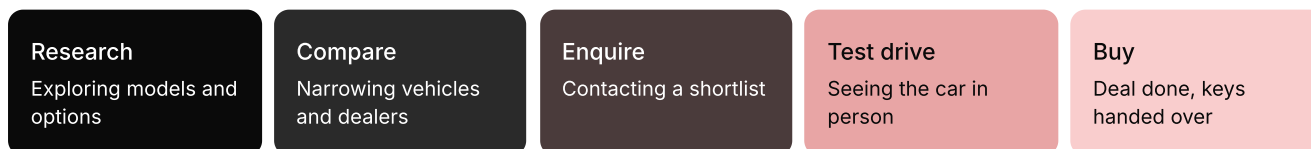
Where buyers research

Buyers move between channels constantly. The dealers that win are visible, consistent and easy to contact everywhere buyers look.

CHANNEL	WHAT BUYERS USE IT FOR
Google search	Model comparisons, prices, offers, used stock and "dealer near me" searches.
AI assistants	Shortlists and summaries, such as "best family SUV under \$50k" or "where to service my car in Brisbane".
Marketplaces	Comparing stock and prices across dealers and private sellers.
Your website	Checking real stock, specs, pricing, finance and trade-in, then enquiring or booking a test drive.
Google Business Profile	Reviews, opening hours, directions and calls for each location.
Social media	Discovering new models and offers, and getting a feel for the dealership.

2. The buying journey, stage by stage

Mapping the journey shows what buyers need from you at each point, which channels matter, and what to measure.



STAGE	WHAT BUYERS NEED	KEY CHANNELS	MEASURE
Research	Helpful information on models, ownership costs and new versus used, with your dealership visible as a local option.	SEO, AI search, social, video	Organic visits, branded searches, AI mentions
Compare	Real stock with clear pricing, offers, finance estimates and trade-in options.	Google Ads, stock ads, remarketing	Vehicle page views, saved or compared stock
Enquire	Fast, easy ways to ask a question, check availability or request a price, by form, phone or chat.	Website, Google Business Profile, Meta lead ads	Enquiries, calls, response time
Test drive	A simple booking, a confirmation and a car ready when they arrive.	Website, phone, SMS and email	Test drives booked and attended
Buy	A smooth handover, then a reason to come back for servicing and their next car.	Email, SMS, service campaigns	Sales, service bookings, reviews

3. Five foundations of dealership marketing

Before adding more campaigns or budget, make sure these five foundations are in place. Each one makes every other channel work harder.

01 A website built around your stock

Every vehicle should have its own fast, mobile-friendly page with photos, pricing, key specs and clear calls to action: enquire, book a test drive, value my trade-in and estimate finance. Keep stock in sync so buyers never chase a car that's already sold.

02 Stock-led advertising

Ads that show the actual vehicles you have, with current pricing, outperform generic brand messages for buyers who are comparing. Feed your inventory into Google and Meta so ads update as stock changes.

03 A strong Google Business Profile for every location

Each showroom and service centre needs a complete, accurate profile with the right categories, hours, photos and a steady flow of genuine reviews. It's often the first thing a local buyer sees.

04 Fast lead handling

Buyers usually contact more than one dealer. The first to respond with a helpful, personal answer has a real advantage. Set clear response targets for every lead source, including after hours and weekends.

05 Measurement from click to sale

Track every enquiry, call, test drive and sale back to its source, and connect your marketing data to your CRM, so you know which campaigns sell cars and can invest with confidence.

4. A 12-month dealership marketing calendar

Dealership marketing works best as an always-on presence with planned peaks. Adapt this outline to your brands' model launches, manufacturer offers and your own sales targets.

ALWAYS ON · ALL YEAR

SEO and Google Business Profile updates, stock-led search and social ads, brand search ads, remarketing to recent website visitors and service booking campaigns.

EACH MONTH

Review stock levels and push the vehicles you most need to move, such as aged used stock or demos. Refresh creative and offers, and check lead response times.

MODEL LAUNCHES AND MANUFACTURER OFFERS

Launch campaigns with enough lead time to build interest, including expressions of interest for incoming stock. Follow brand guidelines and keep landing pages up to date.

END OF FINANCIAL YEAR

A key sales period for many dealers, particularly with business buyers. Plan stock, offers and budget early, and lift spend in the final weeks of June.

END OF CALENDAR YEAR AND PLATE CLEARANCE

Clearance and run-out campaigns for outgoing model-year stock, with clear deadline messaging and remarketing to buyers who have already shown interest.

QUARTERLY REVIEW

Review enquiries, test drives, sales and service bookings by brand, location and channel. Keep what worked, cut what didn't, and set the plan and budget for the next quarter.

5. Multi-brand groups, locations and departments

Automotive groups often run several brands, several locations and separate new, used and service departments. Each needs its own approach, inside one consistent group strategy.

Running several brands

- **One ad account per brand.** Separate accounts keep budgets, results and manufacturer requirements clean, and make it clear what each brand is achieving.
- **Local targeting for each location.** Target the suburbs and regions each dealership actually serves, so your own brands don't bid against each other for the same buyers.
- **Shared learnings, rolled-up reporting.** Test an idea on one brand and roll out what works. Report each brand on its own, then roll up to the whole group.

New, used and service

DEPARTMENT	HOW BUYERS BEHAVE	WHAT WORKS
New vehicles	Research the model first, then compare dealers on price, offers, stock and service.	Model and offer campaigns, brand search, launch campaigns, expressions of interest.
Used vehicles	Search by make, model, budget and body type, and compare across marketplaces.	Stock-led ads, strong vehicle pages, remarketing, finance and trade-in calls to action.
Service	Search locally when a service is due or something goes wrong, then return if the experience is good.	Local SEO, Google Business Profile, "car service near me" ads, service reminders.

Don't forget service. It brings customers back regularly, builds loyalty and often leads to their next vehicle purchase. Give it its own campaigns, budget and reporting, rather than leaving it as an afterthought to sales.

6. Measuring what matters

Long research cycles and many lead sources make dealership marketing harder to measure, but not impossible. Focus on a small set of metrics that connect marketing activity to sales.

METRIC	WHY IT MATTERS
Enquiries and calls by source	Shows which channels bring buyers into your pipeline. Track calls as well as forms.
Lead response time	Speed often decides who wins the sale. Measure it for every lead source.
Test drives booked and attended	Your clearest signal of a serious buyer.
Cost per enquiry and per test drive	Compares channels, brands and locations fairly and guides where to spend.
Sales and service bookings by source	The true measure of value. Connect marketing data with your CRM or DMS where possible.

7. The 20-point dealership checklist

Work through this list. Anything you can't tick is an opportunity.

CHECK	AREA
1 Every vehicle has its own page with photos, price and key specs	Website
2 Enquire, test drive, trade-in and finance options are on every vehicle page	Website
3 Stock on the website stays in sync with what's on the lot	Website
4 The website is fast and easy to use on mobile	Website

CHECK	AREA
5 Every location has a complete, accurate Google Business Profile	Search
6 You ask every happy customer for a Google review	Search
7 You rank for new, used and service searches in your area	Search
8 You've checked how ChatGPT and Google's AI describe your dealership	AI
9 Stock feeds power your Google and Meta ads	Campaigns
10 Each brand has its own ad account, budget and local targeting	Campaigns
11 Remarketing reaches buyers who viewed vehicles but didn't enquire	Campaigns
12 Service has its own campaigns and budget	Campaigns
13 Every lead is answered quickly, including after hours	Leads
14 Leads from every source flow into one CRM	Leads
15 Test drive bookings are confirmed and followed up	Leads
16 New owners receive service reminders and follow-up	Leads
17 Calls are tracked by source, not just forms	Measurement
18 Enquiries, test drives and sales are tracked by brand and location	Measurement
19 Lead response time is measured and reviewed	Measurement
20 Results are reviewed each quarter to set the next plan	Measurement

WORK WITH BASE DIGITAL

Want to know where your dealership stands?

Base Digital is an independent, owner-led Brisbane digital marketing agency. We've helped automotive businesses, from multi-brand dealer groups to car service businesses, reach local buyers and turn enquiries into sales and service bookings. We'll review your dealership against this checklist and show you the biggest opportunities, with no lock-in contracts and no hard sell.

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