

service & parts

THE LATEST SERVICE, PARTS AND COLLISION NEWS

Service scheduling better, but gaps remain

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Service departments drive dealerships' profits, but 1 in 6 customers who call for an appointment can't get scheduled for a specific date and time. While the industry is improving scheduling service by phone and online, gaps threaten customer loyalty, according to benchmarking firm Pied Piper.

"If you talk to dealers, 70 or 80 percent of their profit comes from fixing cars," said Pied Piper CEO Fran O'Hagan. "So this is a huge issue for dealers, and therefore the manufacturers need to pay attention to it."

A dealership's service department is not only vital to its bottom line, it's where dealers often win — or lose — customer loyalty. Customers who encounter friction when trying to make an appointment may look elsewhere for service and never return, industry experts say.

"Dealers on average lose half of their new-car sales customers from service within two years," O'Hagan said. "Make scheduling difficult, and it only gets worse."

Pied Piper's 2026 Service Scheduling Effectiveness Auto Industry Study compared average customer experience when scheduling service through



GETTY

Volkswagen was the top brand in Pied Piper's study based on its dealerships' stellar performance making service appointments by phone.

dealership websites and by phone. Dealerships received scores for both from 0 to 100 based on weighted measurements tied to best practices most likely to drive service revenue and customer loyalty.

Pied Piper combined the scores for an overall ranking. The study, in its second year, submitted 6,538 service requests across 33 automotive brands and four independent service brands.

Volkswagen was the top brand based on its dealerships' stellar performance making service appointments by

phone.

More than two-thirds of service customers still prefer to schedule appointments by phone, according to Pied Piper.

Volkswagen's score grew 11 points to 73; it ranked seventh last year. The industry average in 2026 rose 7 points to 66.

VW's improvement is a "direct result of many of the actions that we have taken over the last 18 to 24 months to improve our customer experience," said David

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Service scheduling improves

Pied Piper submitted 6,538 service requests via website and phone to dealerships representing 33 auto brands and 4 independent service center brands. The dealerships and service centers were scored from 0 to 100 based on performances in weighted measurements. Those were combined into an overall score. All brands improved from 2025.

BRAND	SCORE	CHANGE FROM '25	BRAND	SCORE	CHANGE FROM '25
Volkswagen	73	+11	Mercedes-Benz	66	+6
Volvo	71	+13	Ind. average	66	+7
Acura	70	+9	Hyundai	65	+9
BMW	70	+6	Jaguar	65	+8
Mazda	70	+6	Land Rover	65	+7
Nissan	70	+8	Subaru	65	+4
Cadillac	69	+7	Buick	62	+7
Honda	69	+6	Kia	61	+2
Mini	69	+3	Mitsubishi	61	+7
Porsche	69	+7	Chrysler	60	+11
Audi	68	+9	Fiat	59	+7
Chevrolet	68	+12	Jeep	59	+7
Ford	68	+7	Lincoln	59	+9
Toyota	68	+7	Genesis	58	+4
GMC	67	+6	Dodge	55	+5
Infiniti	66	+3	Ram	52	+10
Lexus	66	+2	Alfa Romeo	45	+3

Source: Pied Piper's 2026 Service Scheduling Effectiveness Auto Industry Study

Native American students restoring F-350 for SEMA

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Olivia Decoteau used to join her grandfather as he worked on restoring old vehicles, and she'd view welds her father completed.

Now Decoteau, a junior at Flandreau Indian School in South Dakota, will put her own welding and automotive skills to work as part of a project to restore a 1976 Ford F-350 that ultimately will be shown at the 2027 SEMA Show, an event for the automotive specialty equipment industry.

"It's pretty cool," she said. "I've worked on trucks before but never an F-350."

Northern Tool + Equipment in September gave the truck, which came from a working Oregon farm, to the boarding school's career and technical education class. The donation is part of the Northern Tool Build IV program, aimed at promoting the skilled-trades workforce.

The students are tasked with turning the truck into what's been dubbed America's Ultimate Trades Toolbox. The different compartments of the truck will showcase various trades such as construction, electrical or automotive body detailing.

The half-century-old F-350 still runs but needs a lot of work. At the truck re-

veal, students were warned not to put their feet too firmly on the floor lest they accidentally punch through its rusted floorboards.

The students have until May 5 to complete the truck. It will head to SEMA in Las Vegas in November 2027.

Northern Tool + Equipment chooses a new underserved school for each project and worked with the Bureau of Indian Education to identify schools with shop classes; Flandreau applied in the spring and was selected. For the first time, half the build team is female.

Frank Crowson, the company's chief commercial officer, pointed to a growing need for trades professionals, including automotive mechanics and welders, amid an ongoing skilled-labor gap.

"For every boomer who retires from the trades, there's a major dearth of young people ready to fill that gap," he said.

There are about three job openings for every person completing a relevant skilled trades training program, which leaves a talent shortage of an estimated 1.3 million workers, according to a study by Idaho market intelligence



Northern Tool + Equipment donated a Ford F-350 utility truck to a South Dakota high school career and technical education class to restore. The vehicle will be shown at the 2027 SEMA Show.

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NORTHERN TOOL +
EQUIPMENT

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Alaska used-car dealer Payless settles AG's unadvertised document fees case

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Payless Used Car Sales will pay more than \$500,000 to Alaska consumers to resolve state allegations of unadvertised document fees.

Payless, which admitted no wrongdoing under the Sept. 28 settlement, agreed to pay \$100 each to more than 5,000 customers. Those payments are to be made within 280 days of the settlement.

The two-store Anchorage, Alaska, dealership group that operates as Payless Car Sales usually charged \$499 document fees.

Full vs. partial restitution

"The State chose to accept less than full restitution to avoid putting Payless out of business," the Alaska attorney general's office wrote in a Sept. 22 news release.

A tougher settlement wasn't "worth putting a significant number of Alaskans out of work — many of whom had nothing to do with the conduct at issue," Acting Attorney General Cori Mills said in a Sept. 22 statement.

Payless is thankful to "close this chapter" with the attorney general, Payless attorney Rachel Lauesen said in an Oct. 2 statement.

"The assertion that Payless would be driven out of business if it had to 'pay full restitution' or 'the vast majority of illegal fees were charged prior to 2024' is speculative," Lauesen, of the Anchorage-based Lauesen Law Team, said in the statement.

She said Alaska didn't look at Payless' records before Oct. 12, 2023, "so it does not know what those records contain or if Payless charged 'illegal fees.' What the Attorney General's office actually does know, and fails to mention, is that Payless has not charged any dealer documentation fees whatsoever for almost three years."

Payless broke state law by listing vehicle prices on its website that failed to include the document fee costs it was charging customers, Mills' office said.

The settlement applies to all Payless auto deals with document fees from Nov. 4, 2018, to Dec. 31, 2023, and all deals with document fees from 2024 onward where the customer paid

more than the advertised price.

Payless said it agreed to pay everyone charged a document fee "regardless of whether the dealer documentation fee could arguably be considered to be a violation," though it also said receipt of a \$100 payment "does not mean a customer was charged 'hidden fees.'"

Price transparency

The state-level allegations against Payless come amid heightened attention to dealership price transparency at the national level. The Federal Trade Commission in March declared behavior like what happened in the Payless case illegal at the federal level.

The FTC said in March that dealers nationally must incorporate all mandatory charges like document fees in advertised vehicle prices, with government fees and taxes the only exceptions. Failure to comply violates the FTC Act's prohibition on unfair and deceptive practices, the FTC said.

Alaska declared such behavior illegal years ago with a law requiring

dealer ad prices "must include all dealer fees and costs" except for amounts owed to the government.

"Alaska's law on dealer fees is clear," Mills said in a statement. It is "unacceptable for a business to offer one price online and then a higher price at the dealership as a result of tacking on previously undisclosed dealer fees," she said in the statement.

Alaska has announced at least two other six-figure dealership advertising case settlements in the past 12 months.

In December 2025, the state said Lithia Motors agreed to pay Alaska \$300,000 and reimburse affected customers to settle allegations of advertised prices lower than what dealers charged. In March 2026, the state said Swickard Auto Group agreed to pay a \$800,000 penalty and accept a \$200,000 suspended penalty to settle allegations of advertising unavailable models and failing to honor advertised prices, the state said. Neither group admitted wrongdoing under the deals, and Swickard denied the allegations.

N.C. group acquires Ford, Toyota, Honda stores

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Capital Automotive Group of Raleigh, N.C., has completed the acquisition of retiring dealer Larry Cloninger's six dealerships and a collision center in the Carolinas.

The acquisition, which fully closed as of Sept. 29, included five stores in North Carolina and one in South Carolina. Tim Michael, president of Capital Automotive, and Cloninger are longtime friends, according to a Sept. 30 news release.

The sale marks Cloninger's exit from dealership ownership, said Lindsey Michael Longo, chief strategy officer and partial owner of Capital Automotive. Her family's group now has 50 stores.

"We're very competitive, but at the end of the day, we're very friendly to our competition," Michael Longo said.

The dealerships involved in the transaction are:

- Toyota of Florence in South Carolina, now Capital Toyota of Florence.
- Cloninger Toyota in Salisbury, N.C., now Capital Toyota of Salisbury.
- Cloninger Ford in Salisbury, now Capital Ford of Salisbury.
- Cloninger Honda in Salisbury, now Capital Honda of Salisbury.
- Cloninger Ford of Morganton in North Carolina, now Capital Ford of Morganton.
- Cloninger Ford of Hickory in

North Carolina, now Capital Ford of Hickory.

The deal included Cloninger Collision Center in Salisbury, now Carolina's Collision Center of Salisbury.

The Toyota and Ford stores in Salisbury share a parking lot and service drive, Michael Longo said. Capital plans to renovate the Toyota facility and separate the service drives.

Cloninger had no succession plan for his dealerships and did not put them up for sale on the open market, Michael Longo said.

"He wanted to make sure that his people were taken care of," she said.

In a statement, Cloninger said he has known the Michael family for more than four decades, making

them a "natural choice" to take over his stores.

"When you spend your life building something, the people you ultimately entrust it to matter tremendously," Cloninger said. "I know the kind of people they are, the way they operate their dealerships and the importance they place on their employees and communities. There is a tremendous amount of comfort in knowing these stores and our people are being handed to a family we know, respect, and trust."

Capital Automotive still wants to grow, targeting one to three new stores a year, Michael Longo said.

"We don't use any private equity money," she said. "So we try to grow at a steady rate."

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Durant, senior vice president of after sales at Volkswagen of America.

After several years of performing poorly on the JD Power Customer Service Index Study, VW enrolled the majority of dealerships in its certified scheduling program, which included website audits and ensuring third-party vendors met VW standards, Durant said.

VW improved scheduling capability through its myVW mobile app, Durant said, eliminating unnecessary phone calls to dealerships from customers who preferred to schedule through the app.

And dealership service teams could then focus on call-in customers "not as comfortable with online scheduling," he said.

Volvo also did well, finishing second. The luxury brand rose 13 points to 71.

All Volvo customers were able to schedule a service appointment for a specific date and time through the website, the study found. A poor phone scheduling performance kept it out of the top spot, however.

"We're working closely with our retailers on sales and service call handling, including training, coaching and best practices," a Volvo spokesperson said. "At the end of the day, our focus is making it easy for customers to reach Volvo and our retailers, however they chose to connect."

Every brand improved its overall score in the study, but some issues continue.

For example, 16 percent of callers in the study attempting to schedule didn't get an offer to set up service at a specific date and time.

Among that percentage included some 30 "large national" franchised dealership groups, smaller groups and single-point stores, and independent centers, O'Hagan said.

Customers were unable to schedule service on some brand websites more than 10 percent of the time, said Cameron O'Hagan, Pied Piper's vice president of metrics and analytics.

Volkswagen is focusing on both phone and online appointments, Durant said. Its dealers work with outside vendor Shift Digital, which handles inbound calls and schedules service appointments directly into stores' dealership management systems.

That's had a "significant improvement" in phone scheduling response times, he said.

Independent service providers, while performing poorly on website scheduling, were better at scheduling by telephone than dealers, Pied Piper found.

If customers have a poor telephone experience with a dealership, then call an independent service provider, "there's a pretty good chance that they have a good interaction, and then they are gone as a customer," Cameron O'Hagan said.

Many dealerships also are turning to artificial intelligence software for scheduling.

AI did boost service scheduling efficiency, Pied Piper found, but a third of AI-to-human transfers failed, typically an average of one and a half minutes into the call, essentially wasting the customer's time.

It's important dealership general managers and service managers monitor how effective any technology is, including AI, Fran O'Hagan said.

"The ones who say, 'Oh, I'm going to buy some technology and now it's hands-off,' they're the ones who are going to have problems," he said.

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firm Lightcast.

Still, Crowson said he sees momentum among young people entering trades.

"We find a school that we believe is really committed to the trades," he said. He added that schools should have "the right instructor, the right focus on the trades, the right passion, and then a need for some of the support we can provide."

Other companies are supporting. DeWalt is providing professional-grade tools, and House of Kolor is helping to reopen the school's paint booth and will provide paint for refurbishing the F-350.

"This project will completely revitalize our shop program," said Tom Hansen, class instructor at Flandreau.

Keaton Lee, a custom painter and automotive influencer, will work alongside the students.

And service technicians from Einspahr Auto Plaza, a Chrysler-Dodge-Jeep-Ram-Ford dealership in Brookings, S.D., will help students with automotive diagnostic and technical work, plus expose them to professional auto technician work.

Hansen said the school was surprised to get the truck. The small town doesn't get much attention.

"We're grateful to be selected and given a chance to positively represent our community and culture while providing these students with the experience of a lifetime," he said.

For the school's students, having a career and tech education class "opens up an avenue for a future career that they may not have had otherwise," Hansen said. "Real, hands-on training is extremely valuable, and I hope this experience encourages these students to explore careers in the trades."

Dominick Vitsui, a senior, said he began welding last year through a class at the school, "and I started liking it because the teacher that I had made it fun," he said.

Does he see some things on the F-350 that could use some of his welding expertise?

"Oh, yeah," he said. "The floor."

Automotive News

People on the Move

SALES

NEW HIRE

Craig Lyness

Vice President of Sales

Phillips Tube Group, Inc.

Middletown, Ohio



Phillips Tube Group, Inc. has appointed Craig Lyness Vice President of Sales. Craig will lead the company's sales division and strategy, overseeing account management and business development of Tier 1 & Tier 2 suppliers and OEMs.

He joins Phillips Tube Group with over 32 years of sales experience in the steel tube industry, which began in Europe in the mid-nineties. Craig brings decades of automotive, HVAC and mechanical tubing expertise. This past year, he led the launch of Tutella Logistics, a partner company of Phillips Tube Group, where he built the brokerage division for hauling steel-related products.

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