

Time to Buy Your F&I Professional a Dog?

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There's an old joke that illustrates advances in commercial airplane technology.

Question: "What is the ideal cockpit crew?"

Answer: "A pilot and a dog."

The pilot's job is to feed the dog. The dog's job is to bite the pilot if he touches the controls.

If you had told airline pilots in the 1950s that by 2020 electronics would do 98% of their jobs, including navigating and landing airplanes in all sorts of weather, they would not have believed you.

I've thought about those aviation technological advances lately, particularly about what similar strides in technology might mean for that dealership mainstay, the F&I professional. A combination of hardware and software solutions, it seems to me, could put the F&I professional out to pasture, or at least relegate them to the chore of feeding the dog.

These solutions include tabletop computer displays that allow a dealership representative to walk a car buyer through the documentation required to complete the sale. Other approaches offer video presentations that employ filmed human presenters or digital avatars to guide buyers through the process. Still, other advances involve recording the entire F&I process. Combining the approaches, it seems to me, would essentially eliminate the need for the traditional F&I professional.

But why would dealership leaders want to spend the significant sums necessary to replace real people with technology?

First, the F&I process is one that is infested with state and federal compliance land mines. The form documents that dealers use must be correct and correctly completed, the order in which they are presented matters, and the verbal presentation that accompanies the document signing must be done properly (and what must be said by dealer representatives can be as important as what cannot be said). The entire process must be done the same way, over and over again. After the car rolls off the lot, the dealership may well need to prove that it has correctly dotted and crossed everything that needs dotting and crossing.

Having ethical, honest, competent, and trained F&I personnel to handle these tasks can be very expensive. Those folks can be hard to find, and F&I turnover is notoriously high. Dealerships end up "training a parade," and every new hire creates the risk that the dealership will end up with a bad egg who damages the dealership's good name and who is a walking lawsuit waiting to happen.

The chore of, "Do it exactly the same way every time and be able to prove you did!" is the sort of thing that computer hardware and software does best. When the compliance, sales, and documentation processes are baked into the computer hardware and software, dealership employees will not need nearly the skills of today's F&I professional. Smart folks with a significantly reduced level of training will be able to do the job more uniformly and with less risk of liability to the dealership.

I'm not thinking that things in the F&I office will change overnight. It will likely take a number of years before we see a really advanced and automated F&I process in most dealerships. Even if these advances do come to pass, there will be roles for trained F&I professionals in dealerships in the future. Those folks will design and oversee F&I processes that are delivered electronically by relatively less-trained dealership personnel.

Maybe I'm wrong. But if I'm right, it might be time to think about buying your F&I professional a dog.

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