SPECIAL REPORT

The Language of Closers

by Tess Karesky, CDK Global Retail Insights
Open Communication

Somewhere in one of your many inboxes is a message (or two or three) that’s been sitting far too long without a reply. It’s not that you don’t care to reply. You really would love to catch up with that old friend or give that plucky college grad some career advice or explain to grandpa that a Nigerian prince isn’t offering him money.

The rise of online communication has opened many doors, but it can also be stressful and difficult to navigate. Email and text messaging allow businesses to communicate with individual consumers at scale. But, thoughtful responses take time and consideration, and boilerplate emails are recognizably impersonal to shoppers. Effective online communication requires businesses and their employees to use new skills, to carefully balance their own objectives and those of the consumers with whom they’re communicating, and to do so without the help of social cues. We have to try to choose the right words that will convey tone and meaning (without going overboard with emojis). Can you imagine what you would think if your realtor emailed you with “i fnd a gr8 house 4 ul”?

The Shift to Digital

Until recently, these complications around online communication were a non-issue for car dealers. When a shopper was interested in buying a car they would simply call or show up on the lot. The world has changed, though, and dealers now communicate with shoppers via email and text messages. Dealerships know that a slow response to a lead is as good as losing the lead. We know that the faster the response time, the more likely the shopper is to engage. What’s not so black and white is just what to say in that response. What content and language brings a shopper from the other side of a screen to holding the title of a car on the lot?
At CDK Global, we have been asking just that question. It turns out answering that question is more complicated than you might think. Jason Kessler, a data scientist at CDK, has done extensive research in sentiment analysis while working toward his Ph.D. in computer science. Sentiment analysis uses natural language processing (a field of computer science) to computationally derive whether a passage expresses positive, negative, or neutral evaluations or emotions. According to Kessler, “People are actually pretty bad at predicting what kind of language is engaging. The common, but naïve, approach is to assume positive sentiment is the most persuasive.” However, this often isn’t true. In analyzing shopper vehicle reviews on research sites, words like “love” and “amazing” were high predictors of a positive review. But, those same words were low predictors of persuading other shoppers to take the next step. What did drive shoppers to next steps were specifics about a vehicle like “comfortable” and “quiet.” A three-star review with these words is actually likely to send a shopper to a dealer site over a five-star review that said “I love my amazing car”.

With that in mind, CDK set out to determine how dealers could use more persuasive language to move shoppers through the steps to purchase and ultimately purchase with them. We started with 1,300 stores from one luxury brand and one volume brand. Of those 1,300, we identified the top and bottom 10 percent of email lead closers. With a list of high and low closers in hand, CDK’s Retail Insights team “mystery shopped” the 260 stores gathering email lead responses from each one. Those responses were fed into Kessler’s Consumer Language Tool, which analyzed common language among the highest and lowest closers.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Language of Top Closers</th>
<th>The Language of Low Closers</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Provide</td>
<td>1. Give me a</td>
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<td>2. Phone number</td>
<td>2. To ensure that</td>
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<td>3. Test drive?</td>
<td>3. Options</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Sincerely</td>
<td>4. Dealership</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Quote</td>
<td>5. Free (usually “feel free to”)</td>
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<td>7. Convenience</td>
<td>7. Valid</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Stop (opting out of future emails)</td>
<td>8. Body style</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Online (online credit application, inquiry, discount)</td>
<td>9. Trade (also what are you driving now?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. On my cell</td>
<td>10. Find</td>
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In a list format, the words used by high and low closers should be taken with a grain of salt. After all, we wouldn’t recommend that dealers eliminate words like “options” from their vernacular. However, with context from the Consumer Language Tool, three themes developed.

The importance of guiding a customer

“Give me a” and “feel free to” were typically used by low closers in requesting that a shopper contact the dealer at some indeterminate time in the future. Phrases like “give me a call when you are free” or “feel free to email any time” put the responsibility back on the shopper. However “give me a call to set a time” was almost exclusively used by high-closing dealerships. That’s because it gives the shopper a clear next step. Similarly “test drive” was a high indicator when it was used to ask the customer a question like, “When are you available to come in for a test drive?” Simple and direct questions have simple answers and are easier for shoppers to respond to.

The importance of clear and relevant information

When shoppers contact dealers, they’re typically seeking the answer to a question. The top word for high closers was “provide” and it was almost always used in the context of providing information. Vehicle descriptions, details about the buying process and “quotes” (another high-closer word) all help the shopper gain a better understanding so they can feel secure in taking the next step. However, words like “body style” and “options” were used more often by low closers, possibly indicating that jargon and industry terms are not persuasive when used to answer shopper questions. While industry speak is second nature to dealers, unfamiliar shoppers may just be reminded of how unsure they are about the process.

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If the shopper chose to make contact via email, it’s probably for a reason

The word “give” was the highest predictor of a low closer. Often, it was used in the context of taking the conversation out of email (e.g., “Give me a call so I can assist you”). In this case, dealers have to balance the shopper’s comfort and their own preferences. Of course, not all questions can reasonably be answered via email or text, but dealers should never use email solely as a means to get shoppers on the phone or in the dealership. Be helpful first, then guide the shopper down the purchase path.

Maybe one day there will be an autocorrect button that can identify and replace words and phrases with the most engaging language. Until then, we will continue working to master the language that reaches and persuades shoppers. It’s important to remember that it isn’t just the words that are persuasive —it’s the context in which they are used. Craft responses that are useful and clear, and that guide shoppers toward exactly what to do next. Otherwise you’ll resign yourself to writing emails that stay in the “I’ll get to it later” pile.
How to Start Using the Language of Closers

By Jason Jewert, Performance Improvement Consultant, CDK Global

1. **Start small.** Pick the top five emails that are sent by volume.

2. Open those five emails and get rid of the negative words and phrases. **Replace them with the language of closers.**

3. **Shoppers need to be guided.** Read those five emails aloud with a team and ask, “Are we guiding the shopper?”

4. **Move the process forward** on the medium they chose — email.

5. **Apply these lessons anywhere** they could have an impact in your business — like showroom interactions and phone calls.

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**About the Author**

Tess Karesky works on the Retail Insights Team with CDK Global. For over 16 years, CDK Global Retail Insights has been providing auto manufacturers and dealerships with valuable insight into how shoppers leverage the power of the Internet in making vehicle acquisition and service decisions. Tess specializes in automotive audience segmentation. She has researched and written about the behavior and habits of luxury, Millennial, Hispanic and female shoppers in addition to other consumer groups. Tess can be reached at Tess.Karesky@cdk.com