

## At AutoNation stores, dealers try to put an end to backroom dealing on cars

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Car salesmen always promise that buying a new or used vehicle is easy.

Most consumers know better. Deciphering prices, financing options, fees and discounts often becomes a drawn-out ordeal that confuses and frustrates even the most experienced buyer.

AutoNation Inc., the nation's largest automotive retailer, wants to change that. The Fort Lauderdale-based company has invested millions of dollars in software and training that eliminates the need for backroom dealing at its 37 South Florida stores.

The company's new "Smart Choice" menu allows prospective buyers to evaluate their pricing and finance options on the vehicle of their choice by glancing at a single sheet of paper. It gives buyers answers to simple questions, such as, "How much will I pay each month" and "What is the value of my trade-in vehicle?"

The pilot program is being tested at all dealerships in South Florida. The official launch is April 17.

If successful, the Smart Choice system will be rolled out across the AutoNation chain by the year's end, said AutoNation President and Chief Operating Officer Mike Maroone.

"We're making a customer promise" to make the car-buying process transparent, said Maroone. "Our ability to deliver that message is very important."

Andrea Grant, of Fort Lauderdale, visited the Maroone Nissan dealership on South Federal Highway on a recent afternoon, and in about a half-hour, completed the financing and purchase of a 2006 Nissan Altima.

"You can see everything real plain and simple," Grant said of the Smart Choice sales menu. She has purchased three vehicles in her life but said the buying process has never been so fast and easy to understand. "They explain things very well."

Consumers today are more educated about their options because they're able to research online before visiting a dealership, said David McKay, an automotive analyst for consumer group J.D. Power and Associates. AutoNation's Smart Choice program acknowledges that modern truth and is making the process clear for consumers, he said.

"Financing and insurance offices are often a scary place for consumers," McKay said. "Transparency clearly bolsters the perception of trust."

With AutoNation making a commitment to a more open finance and insurance process, others are sure to follow, he said. Similar programs exist, he added, but the key is teaching employees to be upfront in dealings and communicate effectively.

AutoNation's goal is to increase customer loyalty, which it hopes will translate into increased sales and greater market share, Maroone said. The move also helps AutoNation differentiate its business from other auto retailers in a challenging and competitive sales environment, he said.

So far, the program appears to be working, said Christopher McCray, general manager of Fort Lauderdale's Maroone Nissan. Sales are up about 30 to 40 percent at the dealership, which has been experimenting with Smart Choice for the past three months.

AutoNation was among the first automotive retailers to introduce a large-scale "no haggle" policy on vehicle purchases in the late 1990s. In 2003, it rolled out the AutoNation Finance and Insurance menu to give its customers a breakdown of their options.

Smart Choice takes the "no haggle" policy and other menu programs one step further, Maroone said. "Finding the price of the car is only the first step," he said. "This gives you all the variables."

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