

After the Lead Lands

A review of website enquiry handling across UK automotive retail

Foreword

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Margins are tight. Competition is high. For many buyers, the product alone is no longer enough to win the decision. As vehicles become more alike and brand loyalty softens, the retail experience has to do more of the work.

An online enquiry is a simple act, but it signals intent. What happens next often determines whether that intent builds or dissipates. For many dealerships, the reflex is to chase more leads. The greater opportunity often sits in extracting full value from the ones already arriving.

This report looks at what happens after the lead lands. It combines a UK mystery shop of dealer website enquiries, consumer research from MOTORS and Cazoo, and Impel data drawn from hundreds of thousands of UK customer interactions.

What you will see is not a story about dealers ignoring leads. It is a picture of a system that can perform well during operating hours but struggles to stay consistent when enquiries arrive out of hours and when follow-up needs to be sustained over longer periods.

That matters because buyers do not shop in neat sequences. Some respond within minutes; others go quiet and return days later, yet still expect the same fundamentals each time: useful answers, delivered quickly enough to keep things moving, in a way that feels joined up.

This report sets out those patterns in practical terms so you can assess your own enquiry journey against them. The aim is not to criticise, but to surface where operating reality and buyer behaviour are misaligned.

If it helps you think differently about how that gap is managed in your business, it will have done its job. And if it prompts questions about what “good” could look like in your business, we would welcome the conversation.

—  James.

Experience Is the New Battleground

What buyers expect when they submit an online enquiry is no longer guesswork. MOTORS and Cazoo's Consumer Insight Panel, based on over 2,000 UK decision-makers, shows that experience now sits alongside stock and price as a deciding factor.

Experience now rivals
stock and price as a
priority motivator

53% say a trustworthy and transparent experience is a top driver of dealer loyalty

51% say good vehicle selection is key

46% cite competitive pricing and finance offers

Delay drives defection

35% will look elsewhere if a dealer does not respond quickly

This risk increases among:
✓ 55+ buyers (38%)
✓ used car buyers (40%)

Speed is the expectation

67% expect a reply within 6 hours or the same day

26% expect a reply within an hour

Replies to an Email, SMS, WhatsApp enquiry

Buyers expect joined-up interactions

94% expect details provided online to be available in-store

80% expect interactions with a dealer to be simple and joined up

Two-thirds say this is very important. Three-quarters say it influences their decision to buy.

What this tells us...

- Experience is no longer a differentiator. It is a baseline requirement.
- Speed alone is not enough. Buyers expect replies that are quick and useful.
- Delay carries a measurable cost.
- Consistency across touchpoints matters as much as initial response time.
- These expectations apply regardless of when the enquiry is made.

The Enquiry–Experience Gap

Our mystery shop shows this is not a story about ignored leads. Almost all website enquiries receive some form of response. The variability appears in how tailored, timely and complete that response is — particularly when demand and timing collide.

**Speed alone
does not equal
usefulness**

1.3 out of 3

Average number of questions answered

26%

Only 1 in 4 answered all three questions

27% vs 22%

Out-of-hours replies answered fewer questions on average

Speed splits by operating hours

(Median time to first tailored response)

In-hours responses can be measured in minutes.
Out-of-hours, the median response shifts
firmly into next-day territory.

Segment	In-hours median	Out-of-hours median
New	17 mins	13h 12m
Used	35 mins	14h 07m

Almost all enquiries receive a response. Not all are tailored.

12%

did not receive a
tailored reply

New car enquiries were less likely to receive a tailored
reply in-hours than out-of-hours (71% vs 88%)

21%

of new car enquiries did not
receive a tailored response

vs 7% of used car enquiries

76%

received an automated
confirmation

99%

received some form
of response

Brand consistency varies significantly

30%

fully
consistent

32%

partially
consistent

22%

inconsistent

“Consistent” means branding, tone and format were
applied uniformly across each email in the thread. Only
21% of new car enquiries met that standard, compared
with 35% of used.

Some enquiries never reach a meaningful conversation

6%

of dealers
had broken
web forms

6%

did not
allow open
questions

4%

did not feed
submitted
details to the
salesperson

By contrast, overall website ease of use was generally
strong, with an average rating of 4 out of 5.

The Enquiry–Experience Gap

Responsiveness is expected; utility is the differentiator. After-hours engagement gaps fragment the journey and stall momentum.

Outreach is initiated, but momentum decays rapidly

Contact window

Metric	New	Used	All
Number of days email contact is sustained for	4.8	3.0	3.9
Number of tailored emails sent	2.4	3.2	2.8
Number of all emails sent	4.0	4.6	4.3

Tailored attempts (where tailored contact occurred)

Attempts	New	Used	All
1+ attempt	35%	38%	34%
3+ attempts	54%	38%	51%

A third of dealers cease contact after just one attempt. Only 6 dealers sustained contact to the full 21-day monitoring period

Out-of-hours enquiries are more likely to receive just a single tailored attempt.

In-hours vs out-of-hours persistence

Attempts	In-hours	Out-of-hours
1+ attempt	30%	38%
3+ attempts	60%	43%

Video responses:
a strong tool,
uneven execution

27%

used video as part of the response sequence.

Sometimes the video answers the questions, but the email doesn't say so. Other times it just pushes for a call and doesn't answer anything.

What this tells us...

- Most website enquiries receive a response. Tailoring is less consistent.
- Speed divides sharply between operating hours and out-of-hours.
- Replies often move fast but do not fully answer what the buyer asked.
- Follow-up effort exists, but it is typically concentrated in the first few days.
- Small friction points prevent some enquiries from progressing at all.
- The strain becomes most visible when enquiries land outside operating hours or require sustained follow-up.

What Our Data Shows

That data shows performance variability. Impel's data reveals how buyer behaviour compounds it.

Impel's
sample

304,741

leads analysed

89,103

engagements

12.6% of AI-engaged leads resulted in an appointment set without human intervention

Buyer behaviour does not align neatly with showroom opening times

33% of all customer engagement happens out of hours

Out-of-hours demand converts at a similar rate to in-hours engagement.

12.5% conversion out-of-hours vs 11.2% in-hours

90% of those customers booked while the dealership was closed

Buyer behaviour is not linear

3.3 messages to spark an engagement

25% of engagements come after at least 48 hours of silence.

42% of engagements with our AI start within 15 minutes of its initial reply

24% of leads engage after 24 hours passed

60% of appointments are booked within 15 minutes

Buyers engage within minutes—or return days later. Operating models must cope with both behaviours.

Channel choice materially affects speed, effort and conversion

~60% of engagement happens via text/SMS

14% engaged-to-appointment conversion on text vs ~8% on email

2X more people engage within 15 minutes via text

25% fewer attempts needed to secure engagement via text

Channel mix shapes engagement patterns, conversion rates and the number of attempts required.

What this tells us...

- Out-of-hours is not an edge case: it is a material share of demand.
- Buyers both engage quickly and return days later.
- Channels shape speed, effort and conversion.
- That behaviour meets a model still built around operating hours and manual follow-up.
- This is where the capacity gap shows up.

Key Themes and Learnings

Friction emerges where buyer expectations outpace operational capacity.

- 1. Most website enquiries get picked up**
Automated confirmations are common. Tailored responses are common too. The gap is rarely “no reply” — it’s what happens next.
- 2. Out of hours is the capacity boundary**
In-hours response can be measured in minutes. Out of hours, the experience shifts into next-day territory and follow-up effort drops.
- 3. Speed is expected, but usefulness wins trust**
Buyers ask specific questions, yet many replies answer only part of them. Quick does not always mean helpful.
- 4. The experience can feel fragmented, even when dealers are trying**
Multiple systems and templates can create mixed tone and inconsistent brand application within the same enquiry journey.
- 5. Follow-up effort exists, but it’s often compressed**
Many dealers make multiple tailored attempts, but fewer sustain that effort over longer windows, especially out of hours.

What sits underneath these patterns? Human capacity is the constraint. Staff influence at least 87% of car buyers by creating a positive experience. But buyer behaviour now stretches beyond operating hours, compresses into minutes, and re-emerges days later. More headcount alone is unlikely to solve that mismatch. The model needs to adapt.

One important reminder: This mystery shop reflects one channel — and likely a prioritised one in most dealer operations. Add more lead sources, human bias and fatigue, and the consistency challenge increases.

Turning Action Into Insight: Evolve the Model

Mystery shopping identifies effort; data reveals systemic friction. When buyer behaviour outpaces human capacity, the operating model must evolve to maintain momentum.

- 1. Fix the constraint, not the symptom**
The symptom is not always “we need more leads.” Often it is “we are not extracting full value from the ones we already have.”
- 2. Design for out-of-hours reality**
Coverage in that window cannot rely on manual effort alone. It requires structured support that can respond consistently when teams are offline.
- 3. Extend follow-up beyond human stamina**
Your follow-up needs to support the extremes of buyer behaviour without relying on someone remembering to keep chasing.
- 4. Remove bias from lead handling**
Teams naturally prioritise some lead sources and neglect others. Use structured triage and nurture to protect leads consistently across channels, including the ones people tend to dismiss.
- 5. Treat AI as capacity support, not headcount replacement**
When routine and early-stage interactions are handled reliably, teams can focus on the conversations that require judgement, trust and commercial skill.

Turning Action Into Insight: Close the Capacity Gap

Relieving pressure shouldn't create secondary strain. Structured AI provides the necessary scale where human capacity meets its limit.

- 1. Extend coverage beyond operating hours**
AI provides immediate, structured responses when teams are offline, protecting demand that would otherwise shift into delay.
- 2. Protect completeness**
AI answers specific buyer questions consistently before escalation, reducing "fast but partial" replies.
- 3. Sustain follow-up**
AI maintains structured persistence across days, not just hours, supporting re-engagement without relying on memory.
- 4. Remove bias**
AI applies the same response standard across every channel, source and time of day.
- 5. Protect human time**
AI handles routine exchanges so teams can focus on trust, judgement and negotiation.

Turning Action Into Insight: The Implementation Mandate

Technology alone cannot resolve structural friction. Success is dictated by the design, governance, and adoption of the operating model.

- 1. Choose outcomes, not software**
Decide what "better" means before selecting tools. Set success measures upfront, agree ownership, and treat this as an operating model, not an install.
- 2. Buy learning before you buy contracts**
Move quickly, but avoid locking into long-term commitments before the model proves itself in your environment. Use short trials or scoped pilots with defined success criteria and clear review points.
- 3. Strengthen the foundations before layering automation**
Clean data, consistent process, and clear ownership come first. Adding AI to a fragmented workflow will amplify inconsistency, not solve it. Decide what must be consistent, what can be flexible, and what needs human judgement.
- 4. Put guardrails around brand and risk**
Agree tone, escalation rules, compliance boundaries, and data handling before scaling anything. Be clear on where AI can operate safely and where human intervention is required.
- 5. Bring people with you from day one**
AI fails when adoption fails. Be explicit about what it handles, what stays human, and how handovers work. Position it as capacity cover, then support it with training, coaching, and regular performance review.

Methodology

This report draws on three sources.

1. UK mystery shop of dealer website enquiries

We submitted 99 structured enquiries to dealer groups drawn from the Car Dealer Top 100. 91 were successfully delivered and tracked over a 21-day observation window. Enquiries were submitted both in and out of each dealer's published opening hours, and follow-up was assessed for response time, completeness, number of attempts and duration of contact. This study focused on website enquiries as a consistent and controlled entry point. It does not assess third-party portals, inbound calls, walk-ins or paid social leads.

(Fieldwork: November–December 2025 and February–March 2026.)

2. MOTORS and Cazoo Consumer Insight Panel

Online survey of 2,004 UK adults aged 18+, all sole or joint decision-makers in a car purchase.

(Fieldwork ran 11–16 September 2025.)

3. Impel UK interaction data

Analysis of 304,741 UK leads and 89,103 customer engagements, drawn from live dealership environments during 2025. This dataset provides behavioural context at scale to complement the structured mystery shop.



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