

The options conundrum

How does the industry keep pace with fast-changing vehicle options and specifications, asks **Debbie Fox**

Anyone who has ever worked at a motor manufacturer will have a sense of how rapidly vehicle pricing and specifications change.

The frequency with which brochure material needs to be reprinted is simply astounding, as the manufacturer marketing teams tweak their offering in response to competitor actions and market forces. By September of this year, 23,953 individual specification and pricing changes had been implemented across UK market passenger car product ranges. This is a simply staggering figure to conjure with.

But the truth of the matter is that precious few people in the industry are able to keep pace with that rate of change. Staff in customer-facing roles cannot do their job to the best possible standard without the most up-to-date information at their fingertips; as a consequence, many customers are making poorly-informed decisions. Furthermore, this difficult state of affairs applies equally across the retailing, fleet, leasing and finance environments.

So what issues does the industry face through poor access to the right specification data and how can those issues be resolved?

Decisions, decisions

Fundamentally, all companies involved in the downstream supply chain need to offer customers the ability to narrow down their vehicle selection options to a rational and meaningful shortlist.

The emphasis is on creating a buying environment where customers can manage their financial, environmental and specification requirements, right through to considerations relating to corporate responsibility and health and safety.

For example, the subject of fleet-wide fitment of tyre pressure monitoring equipment is an increasingly common consideration, but matching the right vehicle specifications to those needs can be prove very hard indeed.

Furthermore, leasing and finance organisations in particular need the tools to support a faster response to customer enquiries and reduce the time it takes for each order to be processed, and, crucially, to reduce the number of quotes produced at back office, and therefore to reduce the cost of each sale.

It may seem unlikely to some, but industry insiders know how often cars are configured which dealers cannot order or manufacturers cannot build.

Cost can be excruciating

Worse still are the vehicles which do get built, but to the wrong specification. Often, the complexity of related but mutually-exclusive/inclusive option packages are the root cause of the problem. The number of failed builds remains high, and the rectification cost can be excruciating.

So the argument for perfectly accurate and up-to-date vehicle data is immensely strong. From the ability to promote alternative green vehicles or create a better fleet model mix to spread financial exposure, to the disposal risk caused through poor model selection: these are all very real challenges faced by fleet, lease and finance players.

The truth is that no organisation needs to find itself in a position where

these problems cannot be easily managed and eliminated. Having the right data in the right format and accessed in the right way should be a prerequisite for the entire fleet, leasing and finance sectors, and, more to the point, the information has long been out there.

There are tools in the marketplace that cater for the provision and manipulation of accurate vehicle specification and pricing data.

The right data makes sure that organisations and business drivers have all the knowledge at their fingertips to

select, configure, compare and select vehicles for fleet and personal finance or lease.

Crucially, the right intelligence also adds an extra dimension to the vehicle sales process at dealerships, fleet, leasing, finance and consumer portals.

It should be entirely possible for internal systems to identify the advantages of buying one vehicle rather than another and for that system to simplify the critical decision factors, thus driving customers to a specific, best-fit vehicle.

There are numerous specific factors and vehicle attributes that need to be considered during the decision making process. Typically, these might be for example:

- Vehicle price
- Body style
- Fuel type
- CO₂ emissions
- Fuel economy
- Transmission type
- Engine size/power
- Number and position of airbags

The right data should fully support vehicle selection by comparison of individual models and features, thus creating a fact-based system which acts as an informed guide to customers on the models that best meet their needs. Furthermore, the right provider should also be able to integrate its data into any third-party organisation's existing IT infrastructure.

The car market remains a rapidly changing environment with ever-growing data complexity. With each passing year, consumer and industry decisions are being influenced by a changing legislative landscape, with environmental, taxation or corporate responsibility concerns increasingly on the fleet agenda.

Corporate prudence brings with it a whole world of different considerations in the vehicle buying process. Parallel to that, manufacturers are constantly reacting to a fickle consumer environment and embattled marketplace by updating and modifying their product offering.

Only direct access to the fastest and most accurate product intelligence can allow front line staff to keep up-to-date with that ongoing revolution while maintaining high levels of customer service.

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