



**2021 Dealer Panel**

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# **Enhancing Sales Performance with Conversational AI**

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Lessons from the Front Lines

# Introduction

At this year's Digital Dealer in Las Vegas, two topics seemed to be foremost on attendees' minds (and on the agenda): the current headwinds facing automotive and continued technology disruption. A panel of progressive dealers convened to discuss the challenges in auto retail and how dealerships are leveraging conversational AI technology to enhance business results and operational efficiencies in the current environment.

The panelists were "Big" Al Gillespie, CMO at Feldman Auto Group and Mark Wahlberg Chevrolet, Gray Scott, Chief Marketing Officer at the Cardinale Group, and Casey Sicher-Ford, Digital Marketing and Variable Operations Director for various dealer groups. Art Dessein, Vice President of Enterprise Sales for Impel, moderated the session.

The lively discussion centered around three primary areas where conversational AI technology is making a meaningful impact on dealership operations.

**DIGITAL DEALER** | Las Vegas  
Oct 12-14

**Digital Dealer Panel: Thursday, October 14, 10:00-10:50**

## Conversational AI

Lessons from the Front Line

**"Big" Al Gillespie**  
Chief Marketing Officer  
Feldman Automotive,  
Mark Wahlberg Automotive

**Gray Scott**  
Chief Marketing Officer  
Cardinale Automotive  
Group

**Casey Sicher-Ford**  
Digital Marketing Director  
Variable Operations

**Moderator  
Art Dessein**  
VP, Enterprise Sales  
SpinCar

**Effective and Efficient Lead Management**

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**Enhancing The Customer Journey**

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# Effective and Efficient Lead Management

Due to continued inventory constraints, congested supply chains and labor shortages in the face of high demand, there is heightened pressure for dealers to maximize efficiency while also enhancing the customer experience. “Always on” shoppers want constant access and instant, detailed responses – particularly in a highly considered goods category like automotive. And increasingly feature-rich vehicle options mean more detailed shopper questions than ever during the buying process. The panel pointed out that a high-demand market creates its own set of problems in a labor-constrained industry, with dealers struggling to effectively track and manage record numbers of leads. *“The pandemic made us re-evaluate what was working, and the mission is always to eliminate as much waste as possible,”* Casey Sicher-Ford stated.

The panelists’ dealer groups adopted digital technology and conversational AI products to address the challenges – and they believe the automotive industry is ripe for the same. They emphasized that today’s leading-edge AI technology is light years ahead of the more traditional “auto-responder” products. By implementing always-on automated communications that utilize next-gen conversational AI to manage leads, the dealerships ensured they didn’t miss an opportunity while providing a consistent personalized experience for every inquiry. This had an added benefit: **BDC and Sales staff were freed from chasing endless low-quality leads, focusing instead on nurturing the most qualified high-value opportunities.**

Two distinct features of advanced conversational AI were discussed by the panel:

1.

## Natural language processing (NPL)

AI’s ability to understand and process “natural” language allows it to better understand the way humans speak and write in order to imitate and communicate with them.

2.

## Machine learning (ML)

ML trains a machine to learn by adapting and iterating its models with every interaction, automatically improving its model over time without human programming.

The panelists agreed that this type of next-gen conversational AI is significantly more advanced than the chatbots and last-generation auto lead responders that seemed to proliferate everywhere in the past decade. **It can deliver personalized responses and engage shoppers in natural, human-like conversation — so much so that people often don’t realize when they’re speaking to an AI assistant.** More than one panelist offered anecdotes of customers walking in and asking for the AI they were talking to by name, only to be shocked to learn it was a virtual assistant at the other end of the conversation. *“People come in asking for her. They call for her. They insist on working only with ‘Hannah’ because she’s been emailing her back and forth. And we have to explain that Hannah works from home - she doesn’t come into the dealership,”* Scott said.

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When the market is hot is actually when automated solutions can be most critical. Salespersons may not have much incentive to proactively chase leads or respond to inquiries given inventory shortages or a high-velocity market. But the customer never forgets...It’s critical to have automated smart communications driving engagement with every customer to maintain a good relationship and even uncover more relevant opportunities. If we treat them wrong today, they’ll remember that, and they’ll never do business with our dealership again.



“Big” Al Gillespie

CMO at Feldman Auto Group  
and Mark Wahlberg Chevrolet

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Machine learning is so important. The AI is getting smarter...it’s getting more refined and sophisticated in the way it can answer questions. That’s the real difference, it’s going to get better over time. It’s going to pick up different conversational formats or nuances by geographic region or by demographic. It’s going to do things like that which typical humans wouldn’t pick up on.



Gray Scott

Chief Marketing Officer  
at the Cardinale Group

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# Augmenting Dealer Sales and BDC Staff

Gray Scott provided real-world insight into how conversational AI helped augment BDC and Sales staff: *"We had laid off a lot of people in 2020, and staffing was low as we were coming back from the pandemic in early 2021. Lead volume increased over 20% during first months of the year. With our reduced staff, leads were falling by the wayside: initial follow up was great but fell off a cliff after three days. We could see the train wreck coming. We implemented conversational AI, which helped relieve the lead volume pressure – it's on 24/7, 365 days a year and doesn't take breaks. It helps manage incoming leads and initial questions, then hands off to sales or makes an appointment."*

A key benefit highlighted during the discussion was the AI's ability to remove subjectivity from lead assessment. Whereas BDC or Sales agents may pick and choose which leads they engage with, advanced AI technology responds to and follows up with each inquiry equally, increasing engagement and conversion opportunity.

Al Gillespie remarked that the most robust conversational AI solutions integrate with dealerships' inventory feeds to respond to VIN-level questions. When integrated with digital merchandising and engagement tools, the AI also gathers behavioral data on shopper interests, helping the BDC or Sales agent with more personalized follow-up.

**Time is our most valuable commodity and AI helps maximize time.** You have one hundred leads waiting for you in the morning. Do you really want to call all 100 - or prioritize the twenty who engaged and asked for a call-back?

"Big" Al Gillespie

Panelists noted that the most effective AI platforms also integrate with dealership CRMs, automatically scheduling appointments and updating lead details. They discussed how conversational AI can help "pre-screen" consumers by asking questions, driving towards appointments or phone calls, then handing them off to Sales personnel. Sicher-Ford highlighted their conversational AI's ability to persistently follow up until leads re-engage. This capability enabled the staff to eliminate time spent chasing bad or low-value leads and focus more on nurturing high-potential shoppers and finalizing sales. *"AI was originally looked at as a threat to replace personnel. But it doesn't replace staff – rather, it helps personnel use their time more effectively to produce more value,"* said Gillespie. *"Don't waste time calling or chasing with no way to classify leads. Let the AI chase leads and have your personnel calling the highest-value, most-engaged leads and closing deals."*

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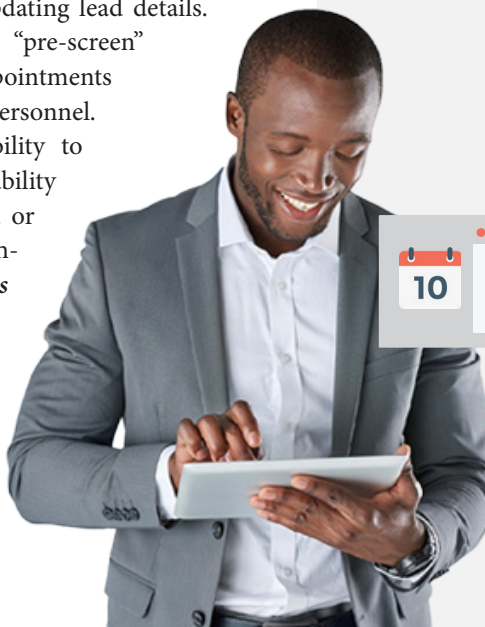
**Shoppers aren't scared to spend money. They just want the process to be fast and easy and get all their questions answered as quickly as possible.**

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Casey Sicher-Ford  
Digital Marketing and Variable  
Operations Director

**23% lift in  
appointments set**  
**Up to 30% increase  
in conversions**



Calendar Notification

1 min ago

10

Appointment with Sarah H to discuss Honda Civic 2019

Saturday, June 10th - 11:30 am

Booked by Mia - Virtual Assistant



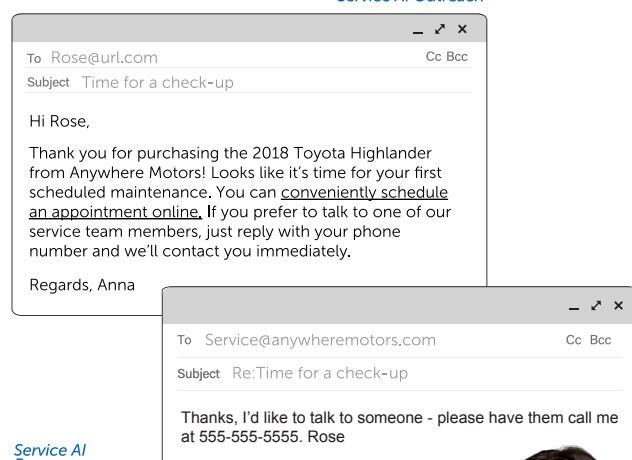
# Enhancing The Customer Journey

The panel also considered potential AI applications outside of the realm of lead management.

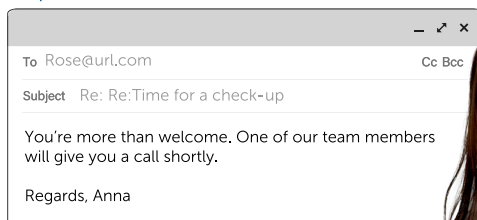
## Service

Panelists discussed personalized service follow-up campaigns targeting loyal customers. AI technology could execute these automatically by integrating with DMS systems, which would also help eliminate errors with customer names, time of purchase, or recommended service schedules. Conversational AI could also automate business development outreach, freeing up advisors to focus on incoming calls, customer management and other revenue-enhancing activities. Gillespie said, *“80% of the calls that come into our stores are about service – and 70% of those are just asking about the status of their vehicle. The moment we started automatically texting customers proactively with the status of their cars (like the Domino’s app), we reduced the number of low-level calls, customer satisfaction went up, our CSI shot through the roof because we’re giving them what they want to hear. We live in a state of instant expectation, no one’s sitting around waiting.”*

### Service AI Outreach



### Service AI Response



## Financing

Panelists also brought up financing applications. For example, dealers could leverage automated AI communications to offer customized finance incentives for car shoppers or service customers based on historical data and their reaction to the initial vehicle or service price (particularly for major repairs). Additionally, AI could help drive re-engagement or winback initiatives, using customer insights to optimize content, creative, offers and frequency.

## F&I

Applying conversational AI to F&I surfaced as an area of opportunity. It's well-known that F&I is a significant gross profit contributor - yet it's responsible for most of the customer frustration and dissatisfaction with the buying process. The products have value for consumers, but perceived high-pressure sales tactics and last-minute expenses reduce attachment rates and cause cancellations and chargebacks. When coupled with effective online F&I merchandising, conversational AI can help improve the F&I experience by answering questions or providing additional recommendations based on shopper engagement data. For example, a shopper who is engaging with SUV models and spending significant time reading about the all-weather package might be a great candidate for dent and ding insurance information. The customer learns about F&I options and indicates interest prior to the showroom visit, while the F&I manager is informed in advance of the customer's interests and can personalize their approach.

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**Digital F&I merchandising can drive early engagement during the shopping journey...conversational AI can enable continued follow-up and communications based on engagement and interest patterns, and after-purchase follow-up on relevant F&I products based on vehicle choices. That way you can have personnel just confirming and finalizing.**

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Gray Scott

# Wrapping Up

In a connected, always-on world, digital technology and AI are becoming essential to retail success in every industry, and automotive is no exception. The benefits are many, with conversational AI in particular enhancing both the shopping experience and operational productivity. *“Any technology that adds value to the customer adds value to the store,”* Gillespie stated. *“We come into the store and we’re working on our schedule. Well, the customer doesn’t care about our schedule. The AI is going to work on their schedule.”*

Retailers that successfully create a seamless omnichannel experience will optimize engagement, improve efficiency and see sustained revenue growth.



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I want my salespeople to always be in front of a customer, selling. The best time to sell a car is when you just sold one – you’re on that high and nothing can stop you. Any tool that I can use, like smart conversational AI, I’m going to use to ensure they’re always with an active high-value customer. **Provide your team with the tools they need to be successful – you’ll be surprised.**

”



Casey Sicher-Ford

## About Impel

Impel offers automotive dealers, wholesalers, OEMs, and third-party marketplaces the industry’s most advanced platform for digital merchandising. The company’s suite of products builds trust between buyers and sellers by bringing the physical showroom experience to car shoppers wherever and whenever they want. Impel’s proprietary shopper behavioral data and digital technology applications enable vehicle sellers to deliver hyper-personalized interactions across the entire car buying journey. To date, the company has delivered more than 2 billion shopper interactions across more than 40 countries. To learn more about Impel or inquire about the details of this whitepaper, please visit [Impel.com](https://www.impel.com).