

# The phone is still best for building leads

**"T**here is still nothing that can compare to a good old-fashioned conversation between a customer and a well trained car sales executive," according to Declan Gaule, the chief executive of sales, training and consultancy company MFG.

Amid the noise around innovations in digital retail, such as live chat and video presentations and the challenges of compliance with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Gaule believes the best way to draw people into a car dealership remains a "relevant and to-the-point" chat over the phone.

Although MFG's business, built on a strong reputation for training sales executives in the art of prospecting customers from their employers' existing database, is now being supplemented by growth into new consultancy and training modules and new territories, Gaule is in no doubt of the strength of the right kind of conversation.

A graduate with a Masters degree in psychology from Sussex University, Gaule originally joined BMW UK's graduate training scheme and rose through the ranks to become a specialist training provider within the group,

eventually holding the post of regional corporate sales manager.

After identifying that a decline in dealer footfall had left a gap between the type of training delivered and the aspirations of retailers, he teamed up with BMW FS UK colleague Jerry Sutton to set up MFG.

Now in its 11th year, MFG said it has trained more than 25,000 sales staff and after Gaule bought a 100% controlling stake in March, the business is planning to grow.

Rapid expansion across 25 countries in Europe, North America, Africa, The Middle East, Japan, China and the Asia Pacific region prompted a recruitment drive, which has seen its number of trainers rise from 25 to an expected 70 by the end of 2018 and a targeted 100 by Q1 2019.

This year, MFG's turnover will rise from £1.5 million to more than £3m and Gaule predicts that next year it will hit more than £9m.

But that level of success depends on maintaining the high standards of lead generation that the business's expert training has built its reputation on.

Gaule said employing experienced car retail professionals, who can draw on their knowledge of the trade to equip sales execu-

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tives with the confidence and the processes they need to carry out prospecting calls, was key to MFG's strong results.

"Telephone prospecting is not something that most sales executives relish in most circumstances and, if they have not received high-quality training, it is a poor use of their time," he said.

"When we have been in, delivered the training and they can see that it has delivered results, attitudes soon change. When prospecting results in great leads and multiple sales, it soon becomes less of a chore."

MFG counts many of the AM100's top retailers among its clients, along with automotive manufacturers spanning the volume, prestige and super-premium segments.

Gaule insists that the real value of the training its team provides is in the lasting effect of what sales staff learn.

Speaking to *AM* about the service offered by MFG last year, Jason Cranswick, commercial director at long-standing client Jardine Motors Group, said: "The training provided by MFG sticks in the minds of our staff like a muscle memory, meaning that the training is delivering skills that are retained long after a session."

MFG specialises in delivering two-day training courses which are pre-empted by dealer marketing and incorporate a prospecting sales campaign while trainers are still at the dealership.

It works with a dealer's existing database –

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whether customers from the last 24 to 48 months or those considered 'lost sales' – to market a prospecting campaign and then follow up with a structured call programme.

Gaule said training and supervised live calling sessions take place across both days of a sales programme.

"What we do is to assist sales executives to drive footfall without using a distress message," he said.

The calls process starts with an early introduction of "a very compelling offer in a short amount of time", he said, but emphasised that a professional introduction and posing the question of whether a customer is interested or not is key. He said: "Do it right and the worst you will get is a 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe'."

Gaule said while it would be much more cost-effective for MFG to provide a distance learning package online – especially now that it is branching into new market territories across the globe – having

industry experts physically present to deliver the sales training message is what ensures its effectiveness.

"It's always an advantage that trainers are there when the calls are being made at first. We can make sure the processes have been taken on board and also work to instil confidence," he said.

Gaule also confessed that an online solution may create the impression of the training programme delivering something akin to "DIY dentistry", whereas its reputation has been founded on a high level of campaign success and long-term benefits which have resulted from his team's professional delivery. In some cases, he said training and prospecting sessions had resulted in a boost of 600 incremental sales.

"In terms of an ROI, we can only really offer a ratio of sales from the appointments generated by the calls we set up," he said. "To date, in 2018, that runs at 53%."

Despite its foundation of providing

traditional sales training, Gaule said MFG is trialling the use of video in Japan and China.

A video reminder serves to introduce customers to the sales executive they have just spoken to and re-affirm their attendance at the showroom.

However, Gaule said: "Our focus will always be on the home market. Our trainers are all based in the UK and have worked in the sector here. I still believe the UK car retail sector is far more advanced than those we have encountered elsewhere in the world."

While it may be more advanced, it is no less challenging. Gaule said current market forces meant realising every potential sales lead on a car retailer's database is more important now than ever.

Cranswick agreed: "Ten years ago, it might have been the type of thing that was used to recover performance, but now it's very much something we return to in order to enhance it throughout the year."