

Case Study

Automotive



The Secret Weapon for Stivers Ford's 'Seal Team Six'

In late 2014, Greg Jones arrived in Montgomery, Ala., from Texas. As the new general manager at Stivers Ford Lincoln, Jones had marching orders to turn around a struggling sales operation that, while doing solid business in Montgomery and its surrounding communities, wanted to boost sales at a time when many consumers were cutting back on big-ticket purchases like new cars.

A small family-owned dealership – with about one-third the inventory of megadealers – Stivers had to find a way to work smarter, to pursue leads more efficiently, and to deliver a customer experience that would turn one-time buyers into lifetime customers.

But with more car shoppers – both locally and from surrounding states – requesting quotes online, the Business Development Center (BDC) group at Stivers found it hard to manually capture and nurture those leads until the prospect was ready to speak with a salesperson. "When you have a BDC with a manager and three people who work the phones and don't know anything about cars, you're just responding generically to online queries, so there's only so much value you can get from that," says Jones. "And as the queries start to mount, it gets harder and harder to track and qualify those leads. You end up with a lot of dead deals."

Jones saw that old model wasn't working. The answer, however, wasn't adding more people.

"We're not big, so we have to make the most of what we have," says Jones. "We think of ourselves as Seal Team Six (the now-famous group of elite Navy commandos). When you don't have a huge group of people, it comes down to precision and execution."

Fortunately for Stivers, Jones didn't arrive in Montgomery empty handed. He brought along a secret weapon.

'Her Name is Eva'

"I walked in the door with her," recalls Jones, referring to Eva, the name he gave the Conversica® Automated Sales Agent. Eva was always a key part of Jones's turnaround plan for the sales group at Stivers. He was in the process of implementing a Conversica virtual agent at a large dealership in Dallas when he took his new job in Montgomery, so he knew what Eva would mean to the Stivers sales team.

"It creates incentives for sales people because they get to focus on hot, qualified leads. We're taking new sales people who haven't sold cars and now they're among our top sellers."

Greg Jones
General Manager, Stivers Ford Mercury

Customer

Stivers Ford Lincoln is a family owned and operated dealership serving communities in the Montgomery, Ala., area and beyond.

Challenge

Improve sales and lead qualification by equipping small, largely untested sales staff with qualified leads.

Conversica Solution

Conversica's AI Automated Sales Assistant with Unlimited Bandwidth.

Conversica Virtual Persona

Eva

Conversica Assists

- 37% increase in new car sales
- 39% increase in used car sales



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"Her name is Eva," Jones announced as he explained how Eva's role was to respond to online queries from prospects using a casual, friendly, soft-pedaled approach. Eva's job, he told them, is not to sell cars, but to convert queries into qualified leads – to converse through email with prospective customers over a series of days or weeks until they're ready to talk with a Stivers sales person.

"People contact us online for information – not to be sold to," says Jones. "With the out-of-state folks especially, they'd rather buy their car from their local dealership, but their dealership isn't giving them the price they want."

Quote requests give dealers like Stivers an opportunity to win the business, explains Jones, but generic responses or hard-sell techniques tend to do more harm than good. "That's why Eva is so perfect," he says. "She doesn't sell them. She helps them. Customers love her. So while she isn't selling them a car, the result is that she's selling them on us. We're building a relationship with that person through Eva."

The Agent Who Never Sleeps

Powered by Conversica's artificial intelligence (AI) technology, Eva responds to requests by recognizing what the prospect is looking for and answering questions or providing further information. In the process, she gauges the prospect's interest, secures the best number and time for them to speak, and then passes them on to a member of the Stivers sales staff.

What Jones loves about Eva is that she works all day and all night, is never sick or distracted, and never has a problem

staying motivated. This, he argues, makes it easy to justify the cost of deploying Conversica. "BDCs get bogged down with deals that aren't deals, or they let leads fall through the cracks, or they just get behind – and all that costs you money," he says. "Eva just works each lead automatically. You can't find an employee who doesn't sleep, doesn't call in sick, works 24x7. But Eva does."

In addition, says Jones, Eva engages with car shoppers "on their schedule, not ours." So when potential buyers are online after dinner or late into the night requesting quotes, they'll receive a response from Eva right then – rather than having to wait until the next day when the BDC team arrives at work. "They'll immediately start engaging with us through Eva, who can move them along the process while they're actively in the car shopping mode."

And because Eva's emails use natural language – nothing like what most people would expect from an AI-powered virtual agent – customers love her. "We had to train our receptionists how to handle customers who call or walk in and ask for Eva," he says. "She's so friendly that people want to meet her in person. Some even want to thank her."

Building Confidence – and More

When he arrived a year ago, Jones kept operating costs low by infusing his team of 20 sales people with a fresh group of young recruits. "Most had no real experience selling cars," Jones recalls, noting the challenge of putting so many untested sellers on the lot. "It's hard to stay motivated when you're just starting

out because car sales is like baseball batting averages; it's mostly an exercise in failure. In baseball, a .300 batter is considered great, but that means 70 percent of the time that batter fails."

Jones saw Eva as a way to "create a team of .800 batters" by cultivating leads until they're ready to talk about buying. "It creates incentives for sales people because they get to focus on hot, qualified leads, and that keeps them motivated," he says. "We're taking new sales people who haven't sold cars and now they're among our top sellers."

Eva's helping to build more than confidence. New car sales jumped 37 percent in 2015 compared to the year before, and used car sales rose 39 percent. Jones says he doesn't see any sign of that trend easing. Indeed, in January 2016, when Ford dealerships nationwide suffered a decline in sales, Stivers saw its sales increase by 12 percent. "When you're up in a down market, you know you're doing something right. When things are tough, my guys are rolling."

One reason, says Jones, is that Eva doesn't let any opportunity die. "She'll cultivate old leads, so when someone responds after being silent for 20 days, we can jump on that opportunity."

Stivers Ford's lean, mean Seal Team Six may still miss a deal or two, says Jones, but not many: "A lot of our sales come from contacts that were initiated 30, even 45 days earlier," he says. "I'd hate to think how many of those sales we'd have lost without Eva working those leads for weeks and weeks."

For more information

See for yourself how Conversica is revolutionising sales conversion management here in Australia. Arrange a demonstration. www.autodigitalsolutions.com.au/conversica email: conversica@autods.com.au call or send a text message to: Jason Grieves - Principal: P: 0439 911 619. Tim Machar - Nat. BDM P: 0410 548 948 Australia's Conversica connection is ADS.



About Conversica

Conversica is the only provider of lead management software for marketing, inside sales and sales organizations. Presented as a customized online persona, Conversica engages and nurtures leads through natural email exchanges until the lead converts into an opportunity or opts out. Conversica is used by more than 12,000 sales representatives worldwide and has assisted in the creation of more than US\$8 billion in sales revenue.

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