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Why Millions of Dealership Leads Never Become Customers

An Analysis of 1.17 Million Automotive Leads: Leads With a Phone Number Reach an Appointment at Nearly 9 Times the Rate, and a Sale at 16 Times

By Vin Micciche, Founder & CEO, Strolid · June 2026

More than its source, its channel, or how quickly it is answered, one thing predicts whether an automotive lead becomes a sale: whether the dealership can reach the customer to have a conversation.

Executive Summary

Across 1,169,475 automotive leads that Strolid's business development teams handled during the 2024 and 2025 calendar years, one variable separates the leads that convert from the leads that don't more clearly than any other. That variable is whether the lead arrived with a phone number.

Leads with a phone number booked appointments at 21.7%. Leads without one booked at 2.5%. That is roughly an 8.7-fold difference, and it grows as the funnel moves toward revenue. By the show stage the gap is 10.5 times; by the sale, it reaches 16 times, a 6.4% sale rate with a phone number against 0.4% without. The sale figure is not a single fragile statistic. It is the same gap widening across three independent stages, each measured against the full base of 121,574 no-phone leads.

The advantage is not simply a matter of lead channel. Comparing internet leads only to other internet leads, the ones with a phone number still booked at 7.7 times the rate, 18.9% against 2.5%. The pattern

also holds store by store. At 207 of the 216 higher-volume dealerships in the data, phone-present leads out-booked no-phone leads, with a median advantage of 8.5 times per store.

The phone-present group made up 89.6% of leads but produced 98.7% of all appointments and 99.3% of all sales. In this dataset a lead with no reachable number is not a weaker opportunity. It is very nearly no opportunity.

The automotive industry is investing heavily in automation: AI responders, chatbots, text cadences, email sequences. The investment is rational, because speed and consistency matter. But the data points to a precondition that automation alone cannot satisfy. An appointment is the product of a conversation, and a conversation requires someone the dealership can reach. The phone number is what makes that conversation possible, and in this data it accounts for nearly all of the result.

This report quantifies the gap across 1.17 million leads, traces it through to shows and sales, addresses what a phone number does and does not prove, and sets the finding against published industry research. The conclusion is straightforward. Communication creates awareness, but conversations create commitment. The opportunity for dealers is not to automate the conversation away. It is to create more of them.

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1. Introduction: The Automation Reflex

Walk through any dealership technology stack and the same instinct shows up everywhere: automate the response. AI responders draft the first reply. Chatbots qualify the website visitor. Text and email sequences nurture the lead for days. The premise is that the bottleneck in automotive sales is the speed and volume of the response, and that software can close that gap better than people can.

The premise is not baseless. Adoption is climbing for good reason. In Cox Automotive's 2025 Car Buyer Journey Study, 25% of new-vehicle buyers reported using AI tools while shopping, and 83% believe AI will reshape car buying within the decade.[1] Speed and consistency are real advantages.

But the automation reflex carries an unexamined assumption: that the outcome a dealership is paid for, the appointment and ultimately the sale, is produced by the automated touch itself. The evidence says otherwise. Both dealers and consumers still anchor the decisive moments of a car purchase on human contact.

A 2026 Urban Science study conducted with The Harris Poll found that dealers trust their in-house sales teams far more than AI tools for lead follow-up, by 57% to 14%, and that 82% of consumers consider follow-up important or extremely important.[2] Cox Automotive found that 63% of buyers consider an omnichannel approach, digital and in-person together, to be ideal, against only 28% who want an entirely online process; just 7% bought entirely online.[1:1] Research from CarGurus and NielsenIQ found that 86% of buyers still choose to see the vehicle in person before purchasing, with the test drive and the price negotiation among the steps they most want to handle with a person.[3]

So the industry pours its energy into the automated touch, while the outcomes that pay the dealership depend on a human conversation. The question this report answers is how much that conversation is worth. It uses the presence or absence of a phone number as the line between leads a dealership can talk to and leads it cannot.

2. Methodology

Data source. The analysis was computed directly from Strolid's source operational data warehouse, the raw lead, appointment, and sale records generated by Strolid's BDC work for franchised dealerships. It does not rely on a pre-summarized reporting layer. A companion data-provenance document records the exact tables, fields, and queries.

Cohort. All leads created in the 2024 and 2025 calendar years (January 1, 2024 through December 31, 2025), across 306 dealerships, with administrative and junk lead statuses removed (bad, spam, duplicate-merge, and inactive codes). The cohort contains 1,169,475 leads.

Funnel definitions. Each lead was tracked through four stages. A lead is a non-junk lead record created in the window. An appointment means the lead has at least one active, non-deleted appointment record. A show means the lead has an appointment marked as shown. A sale means the lead is marked sold. All rates are computed on a distinct-lead basis: a lead is counted once per stage it reaches, so an appointment rate is the share of leads that produced an appointment, not the count of appointment events.

Segmentation. Leads are split by whether a phone number is present on the lead record, a normalized and populated phone field. The no-phone group is genuinely uncontactable by phone; we confirmed that none of those leads carry a number in any contact field. The flag reflects the lead's contact record and is not a post-sale backfill. Leads with no number stay in the no-phone segment through every stage of the funnel, still producing a small share of appointments, shows, and sales, so the segment is not an artifact of contact data being appended to closed deals. The phone-present segment, for its part, includes some numbers that are wrong, mistyped, or disconnected. To that extent the true contactable-versus-uncontactable gap is wider than reported, and these figures are conservative.

Scope and limitations. This is an observational analysis of operational data, not a controlled experiment. Phone presence correlates with lead source and with buyer intent, and the report addresses that directly in Section 4, including a within-channel control. A small number of the dealerships in the dataset run service operations only, so their leads seldom enter the sales funnel; these do not affect the result. Restricting the analysis to the dealers that actually ran a sales operation during the period leaves the advantage essentially unchanged, at 8.4x at the appointment and 15.4x at the sale, against 8.7x and 16.1x for the full set. The figures describe this dataset and are separate from Strolid's company-wide lifetime totals. Because the underlying tables are live, counts may drift modestly over time; the figures here reflect the data as analyzed.

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3. Findings

3.1 The overall funnel

Stage	Count	Share of leads	Step conversion
Leads	1,169,475	100%	baseline
Appointments	230,759	19.7%	19.7% of leads
Shows	136,965	11.7%	59.4% of appointments
Sales	67,893	5.8%	49.6% of shows

One lead in five becomes an appointment. Nearly six in ten appointments show. About half of the shows buy. The appointment is the pivot point of the funnel, the first commitment, and the gate that everything downstream depends on.

3.2 The phone-number gap, and how it compounds

Splitting every stage by phone presence produces the central result.

Segment	Leads	Appointment rate	Show rate	Sale rate
Phone number present	1,047,901 (89.6%)	21.73%	12.93%	6.43%
No phone number	121,574 (10.4%)	2.50%	1.23%	0.40%
Advantage		8.7x	10.5x	16.1x

> **A lead with a phone number is nearly nine times more likely to book an appointment, and sixteen times more likely to end in a sale, than a lead without one.**

Two features of the table matter more than the headline multiple.

The first is that the advantage widens as money gets closer. It is 8.7 times at the appointment, 10.5 times at the show, and 16.1 times at the sale. If a phone number only flagged a slightly better lead, the edge would erode down the funnel as other factors took over. Instead it grows, which is what you would expect if the thing being measured, the ability to hold a conversation, is what converts. Section 4.1 examines that reading directly. The no-phone shortfall also appears at the same low level at every stage: 2.50% of appointments, 1.23% of shows, and 0.40% of sales, each computed on the full base of 121,574 no-phone leads. It is a stable pattern, not a small-sample fluke at the sale line.

The second is that the no-phone segment barely participates in the business. Although it is roughly one lead in ten, it produced only 3,035 of the 230,759 appointments and 484 of the 67,893 sales. Put another way, 98.7% of all appointments and 99.3% of all sales came from the 89.6% of leads that carried a phone number. A lead with no reachable number is, in this data, very nearly no opportunity, which is exactly why obtaining a number (Section 5) is the priority rather than writing the lead off.

3.3 The same effect appears within a single channel

The most important question about the finding is whether it just re-measures lead channel, phone-up leads against internet forms, rather than phone presence itself. It does not. Splitting by phone presence within each channel isolates the effect.

Lead channel	With phone	Without phone	Advantage
Internet (1,050,487 leads)	18.87%	2.46%	7.7x
Phone (118,988 leads)	45.08%	3.36%	13.4x

Among internet leads alone, the bulk of the dataset and the channel where automation is deployed most heavily, a phone number on the lead is associated with an appointment rate 7.7 times higher. The gap is not produced by comparing phone-ups to web forms; it survives inside the web-form channel. It is not produced by pooling a few large stores either. Among the 216 dealerships with enough volume to measure, phone-present leads out-booked no-phone leads at 207 of them, or 96%, with a median per-store advantage of 8.5 times, close to the pooled figure. The effect is broad rather than concentrated in a handful of rooftops.

3.4 Contactability, not speed, is the differentiator

A natural counter-hypothesis is that no-phone leads simply get worked less aggressively. The data says otherwise. Both segments are worked quickly and at similar rates. Phone-present leads were first reviewed by a specialist a median of 6 minutes after they arrived, with 91.5% reviewed. No-phone leads were reviewed at a median of 8 minutes, with 86.9% reviewed. The no-phone lead is not being ignored. It is being worked. There is simply no one to talk to.

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4. Analysis: Why Conversations Convert

4.1 What a phone number really signals

It would be a mistake, and the kind of overclaim a careful reader sees through, to argue that ten digits are magic. They are not. A phone number is a proxy for two things at once. The first is intent: a shopper willing to hand over a callable number has, on average, declared more buying intent than one who withholds it. The second is conversability: a phone number is the practical means of a real-time, two-way exchange, the conversation in which objections get answered, trust gets built, and a time goes on a calendar.

Part of the gap therefore reflects who provides a number, not only what the number enables. We say so plainly. Two things keep the finding standing. The first is the within-channel control in Section 3.3. Among internet leads, where intent is far more uniform, phone presence still yields a 7.7-times appointment advantage, so this is not merely intent sorting itself by channel. The second is the down-funnel widening in Section 3.2. A number that only signaled intent at submission, with nothing behind it, would wash out by the sale line. Instead the edge grows to sixteen times. The most economical explanation is that conversability does real work. The number is the way into the conversation, and the conversation is what converts.

Either way, the operational conclusion is the same. Capture the number and start the conversation. Whether the phone number causes the appointment or simply marks a lead the dealership can talk to, the job is identical.

4.2 The pattern is bigger than one dataset

Strolid's result is dramatic, but its direction matches a decade of independent research showing that voice and human contact outperform digital-only touches.

Foureyes' 2025 benchmark across thousands of U.S. dealerships found that 74% of phone leads converted into appointments, against 40% for internet leads, nearly double.[4] The Marchex Institute, in a 2018 analysis of more than 307,000 calls to over 650 dealerships, found that automotive sales calls convert to a purchase at roughly four times the rate of email, that 28% of dealership callers buy a vehicle, and that 57% of inbound sales calls carry purchase intent.[5] Harvard Business Review's audit of 2,241 U.S. companies found that firms attempting contact within an hour were nearly seven times as likely to have a qualifying conversation as those that waited an hour, and more than sixty times as likely as those that waited a day.[6] Related work led by the same scholar, Dr. James Oldroyd, published through InsideSales.com, found that calling at five minutes rather than thirty improved the odds of contact by a factor of 100 and of qualifying by a factor of 21.[7] Because those two findings share authorship, we treat them as one body of evidence.

Strolid's multiples run larger than the roughly two-fold and four-fold channel gaps in that research, for a structural reason. Those studies compare channels among leads a dealer can already reach. This data compares reachable leads against unreachable ones, a more basic precondition, and the more basic the precondition, the larger the effect. The studies agree on direction; the size of the gap reflects what is being compared.

4.3 The automation paradox

None of this argues against automation. The same speed-to-lead research that shows conversations matter also shows that minutes matter, and software is unmatched at starting contact instantly, persistently, around the clock, and at scale.

The error is treating automation as the destination rather than the on-ramp. An automated sequence that never turns into a human conversation has optimized motion rather than outcome; it counts messages sent rather than relationships opened. As Section 1 showed, people on both sides of the desk still want the human.[1:2][2:1][3:1] This data sharpens the point. The no-phone leads in the dataset were answered just as fast as everyone else (Section 3.4) and still went almost nowhere, because speed into a void is not a conversation.

The reframing the report argues for is narrow but consequential. The metric that matters is not response time or messages sent on their own. It is conversations created. The highest use of automation is not to replace the conversation but to produce more of them for a person to close.

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5. Implications and Recommendations

For dealers, BDC leaders, and dealer-group executives, the finding translates into six concrete moves.

1. **Treat the phone number as a primary conversion asset.** In this dataset, a lead that stays without a reachable number is close to a dead lead, not because it should be written off, but because it cannot convert until a number is obtained (Recommendation 6). The phone-present segment produced about 99% of sales. Audit every lead form and lead source for phone capture, and prioritize sources that reliably deliver callable contacts.
2. **Engineer every channel toward a conversation.** Use AI, text, and email to start dialogues and earn the call-back, not to run unattended into a dead end. Track how often automated touches hand off to a live human conversation.

3. **Compete on speed-to-conversation, not just speed-to-response.** An instant auto-reply is now table stakes; both segments here were already answered in minutes. The advantage goes to whoever turns that first touch into a live human conversation.[6:1][7:1]
4. **Make conversation rate a tracked KPI.** Most dealerships measure lead volume and response time. Few measure how many leads become actual conversations, which is the leading indicator of appointments and, ultimately, of the sixteen-times sale gap.
5. **Staff and structure for contactability.** After-hours coverage and disciplined, multi-attempt outreach turn captured numbers into set appointments. A phone number nobody calls is worth no more than no phone number at all.
6. **For low- and no-phone leads, change the objective.** The first goal is not to sell. It is to obtain a callable number and open a conversation. Treat the sixteen-times gap as the prize to chase rather than a guaranteed transfer: measure your number-recovery rate, the share of no-phone leads your team turns into a working contact, and whether recovered leads then convert, since a number won from a low-intent lead may convert below the native phone-present rate.

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6. Conclusion

Across 1.17 million leads, whether a lead converts turns, more than on any other single factor, on one precondition: whether the dealership could have a conversation. Leads with a phone number booked appointments at nearly nine times the rate of those without, and the advantage compounded to sixteen times at the sale, with almost every appointment and sale in the dataset coming from the contactable group.

The industry has been busy automating responses. The data suggests the prize was never the response. Communication creates awareness; conversations create commitment. Chatbots, sequences, and AI responders earn their keep to the degree that they produce more human conversations, and they are worth little when they replace them.

The mandate is not to automate the conversation away. It is to create more of them.

About Strolid

Strolid is an automotive Business Development Center (BDC) founded in 2014 and headquartered in Salem, New Hampshire. Built by automotive professionals, Strolid provides outsourced sales and service BDC for franchised dealerships across North America, pairing trained human specialists with an AI layer that assists them rather than replacing them. Over more than a decade, its team of roughly 180 specialists has facilitated more than 3.2 million customer appointments (a company-lifetime figure, separate from the totals analyzed in this study) and today handles more than 150,000 dealer conversations, emails, chats, and texts each month. Strolid also created vCons, a now-standardized (IETF) framework for capturing and protecting conversational data. Its guiding principle is that AI answers questions while humans make promises, which is why no customer ever ends a real conversation talking to a machine. Strolid was founded and is led by Vin Micciche.

Strong Process. Solid Results.

References

Prepared by Strolid. The findings are based on Strolid's proprietary BDC operational data as described in the Methodology and detailed in the companion data-provenance document. External figures are attributed to their original publishers, and readers are encouraged to consult the cited sources directly.

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