

MULTICHANNEL

## 90pc of Audi consumers begin research process online

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*Audi City in Berlin*

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By JOE MCCARTHY

NEW YORK – As Audi of America unifies the digital strategy of its independent dealers, customers are given greater control of their buying experience, according to an Audi executive Oct. 14 at Luxury Interactive 2014.

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**Luxury Daily**

In the past, Audi's more-than 280 dealers in the United States played a large role in shaping the online experience, resulting in uneven and disjointed experiences, but the brand is switching to a consistent digital strategy that lets online interactions flow seamlessly into any dealer experience. Far from hurting dealer autonomy, the new approach has resulted in empowered sales associates and a greater feeling of brand community.

"Audi customers are very digital-savvy," said Mark P. Ramsey, general manager of digital retail operations at [Audi of America](#), Washington.

"Next to your home, [your car] is the most expensive purchase you'll ever make and it should be a fun, enjoyable experience," he said.

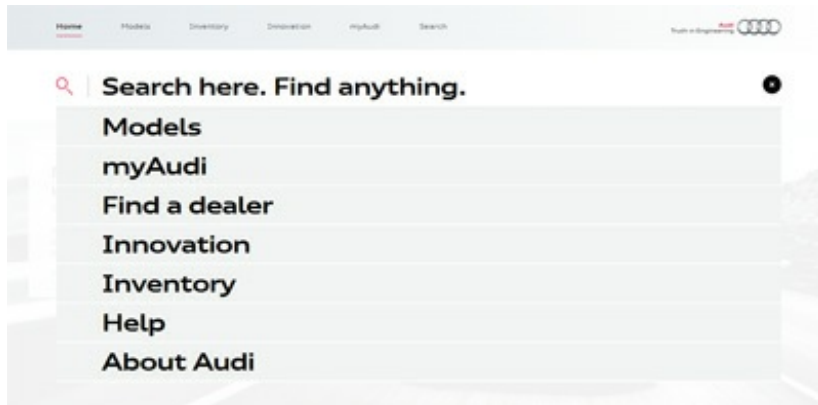
Working together

Prospective Audi consumers traveled to an average of 4.5 dealers per purchase in 2005,

compared to 1.4 dealers today. During this period, consumers did not suddenly become more impulsive.

Instead, the research process shifted to online browsing. Previously, a consumer would have to visit multiple dealers to know exactly what car she wanted and that she was getting the best deal.

Now, consumers can configure vehicles online, compare prices, read reviews, consult brand representatives, access branded social media content and more. This has changed the consumer journey from myopic to panoramic, because consumers can now survey the whole landscape of brand offers online.

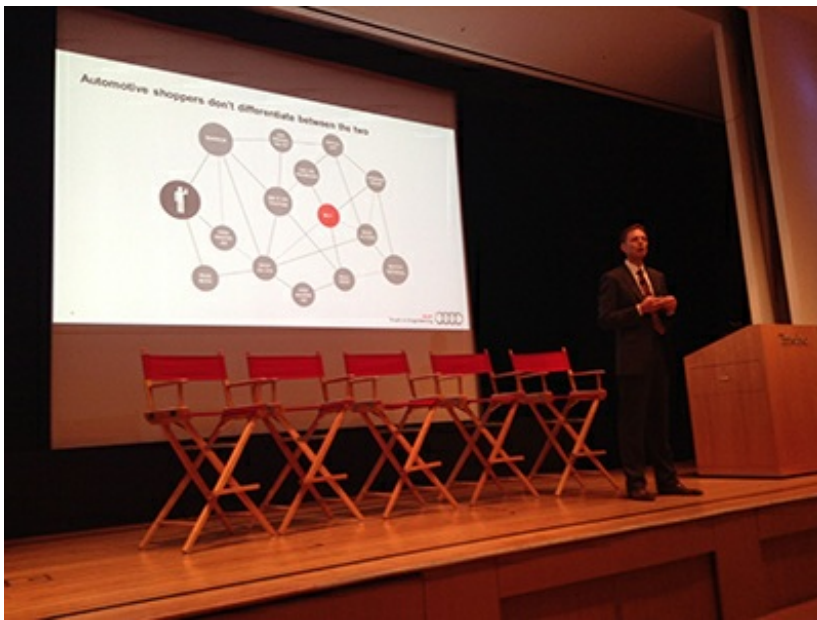


*Audi of America relaunched its main Web site last year*

Indeed, this has also shrunk the research process from six months to three months on average.

Mr. Ramsey noted that 90 percent of Audi buyers begin their research process online. Fifty percent of buyers choose a dealer based on a digital experience, 85 percent use social media and six out of 10 cite digital resources as the most crucial piece of the buying puzzle.

To build off of the digital shift, Audi of America is equipping dealership employees across the country with an iPad application that improves customer service and streamlines the car buying process.



### *Mark Ramsey at Luxury Interactive*

The Audi Progressive Retail Experience revolves around the Sales Assist app that uses a variety of functions to present product information to the consumer in helpful ways. The new program goes on to encapsulate the entire consumer journey, assisting consumers well beyond an Audi purchase ([see story](#)).

Essentially, a sales associate will be able to pull up a pre-populated profile of a consumer if she provides an email address to see what types of car configurations she has created on Audi's Web site, what brand interests she showed online and more information to tailor the dealer experience and drastically reduce time spent working out details.

Mr. Ramsey emphasized that the dealers are involved in every stage of the development process and have generally viewed the new technologies as a great opportunity.

### Testing the waters

Audi continued its shift toward a digital retail experience with its first "Audi City" in Germany.

The virtual Berlin showroom allows consumers to survey the entire Audi portfolio, enabling the brand to minimize retail space and make the experience more immersive. New features at the latest Audi City include 3D virtual viewing of models and the "Audi Select" service ([see story](#)).

Audi UK leveraged virtual reality technology and various digital installations to enhance the consumer experience at the Goodwood Festival of Speed.

The event draws more than 100,000 racing enthusiasts who are being pulled in many directions by competing brands. Brands that want to leave a lasting impact on consumers must begin to leverage technology in ways that supplement the physical experience rather than supplant it ([see story](#)).

"People have a great experience with our product," Mr. Ramsey said. "We're trying to make sure they have a great ownership and sales experience as well."

Final Take

*Joe McCarthy, staff writer on Luxury Daily, New York*

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