AUTOMOTIVE AFTERMARKET TECHNOLOGY

Ford rolls out tablet computers for auto service lane

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Service advisors at Ford dealerships will soon be armed with a new tool: a wireless tablet computer and Web-based application that the company says will improve the intake and inspection process.

The tablets are part of the next phase of Ford's SMART Technology (SMARTT) program, which was launched in 2014. In the first phase, Ford added SMARTT Appointments that let customers use an online tool to schedule service appointments at Ford and Lincoln service centers. In the first year, online appointment volumes tripled, according to the company.

The next phase of the program is the SMARTT Mobile Write-Up solution, which will provide service advisors with tablet computers. Ford is also launching SMARTT Inspect, which allows technicians and parts department personnel to access the data from the tablet application to more efficiently fulfill service orders. The new applications are currently available for dealers using the CDK Global dealer management system. A Reynolds & Reynolds deployment of the mobile application will be announced later.

"Today, the write-up experience typically occurs at a kiosk or desk," says David Ziegler, Ford customer service division technology and innovation manager. "This cuts the cord and allows the advisors to work with the customer at the vehicle on their terms, and it provides a wealth of information so that they can complete the entire write-up."

There are a number of mobile tablet solutions for dealership service available, including modules from most of the major dealer management system providers. A company called MOC1 Solutions offers a Wireless Service Advisor (WSA) software solution, for example. In 2012, Chrysler launched the Mopar wiADVISOR tablet solution for the service lane, which included a device to plug the tablet into the vehicle's diagnostic port.

With the Ford Mobile Write-Up solution, advisors can perform write-ups at the vehicle. It includes a menu of common service requests, along with vehicle history, open recall notices, and a pricing menu. According to Ziegler, the system should make vehicle inspections and walk-arounds more efficient. The tablets can be used to scan VIN numbers, take photos of repair items, and attach notes and customer comments to the service order.

The SMARTT Inspect system then sends that information to the service department. Technicians can access the data, perform a thorough vehicle inspection, and input suggestions for necessary additional services. The inspection results are then available to the service advisor via the tablet to share with the vehicle owner.

The SMARTT Inspect tool helps streamline communication among the advisors, the technicians and the parts department. "If the technician finds anything during the inspection, that is automatically sent to the advisors and the parts department," Ziegler says. "The power of this is that it integrates with the dealer system pricing, so you can show labor and parts, availability of parts, and send a quote to the advisors immediately. If you do that manually, it takes 20 minutes for the technician. It's much faster electronically."

According to Ziegler, the applications are Web-based. "There's a URL," Ziegler says. "It is integrated with their DMS, and all they need is a wireless infrastructure. Dealers can use Apple iOS devices or Microsoft Surface devices for the tablets."

Ford has piloted the applications, along with the installation and training processes for the dealers. "We believe a key component of this is in the implementation and training," Ziegler says. "The people who go on site to install the solution are Ford certified, and we have a sustainment program that is part of the process. We know this is a big cultural change. We're asking the employees to do things very differently."

Ease of use is a key benefit of the solution. "We can take someone who has never written service before, and within 30 minutes have them writing service orders using the tablets," Ziegler says. "Systems we've tried in the past have been too complicated, in some cases. During the pilots, we heard from dealerships that they could easily cross-train other people at the dealership to write service and they quickly adapted to the system."

The mobile solution also takes data points that were previously available on different screens and consolidates them on a single screen to improve efficiency.

While Ziegler couldn't share specific results, he said that at the pilot dealerships there was an improvement in selling more service jobs with the solution in place.

Ford will deploy the solution on a voluntary basis initially. The company will evaluate the dealers to ensure they have the required technology infrastructure prior to implementation. If the hardware or infrastructure needs updated, it could take 30 to 60 days before full deployment. Once that process is completed, there is remote, Web-based training available, along with a week-long onsite training program to use the tools. The dealers receive follow-up visits from Ford staff over the next 12 months to ensure the solution is working properly.

"We've been talking about the program for a year, and we have a lot of dealers that are anxious to get this technology," Ziegler say. "At this point it is voluntary, but as we ramp up there isn't any reason why we wouldn't expand it across the dealer base."