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Cox Automotive Car Buyer Journey Study Finds Efficiency, Digital Tools and AI Drive Record Satisfaction

ATLANTA, Jan. 13, 2026 – The 16th annual *Car Buyer Journey (CBJ) Study*, released today by Cox Automotive, the world's largest automotive services provider, reveals that new technology and a seamless omnichannel retail approach adopted by many dealers are improving vehicle-buying satisfaction in the U.S., despite concerns about vehicle affordability. Higher scores are being fueled in part by the emergence of AI-powered platforms and integrated retail solutions that streamline the process, help improve transparency, and deliver a more personalized experience for consumers. The research was conducted in the fall of 2025 and surveyed 2,300 consumers who purchased a new or used vehicle in the previous 12 months.

As thousands of automobile dealers are preparing to converge next month in Las Vegas for the annual National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA) Show, many will welcome the news that overall satisfaction with the car-buying experience reached record highs in 2025.

“Even with affordability top of mind, buyers know exactly what they need: efficiency, transparency and tools that actually help them easily navigate their vehicle purchase,” said [Lori Wittman](#), president, Retail Solutions at Cox Automotive. “When dealers deliver intelligent, seamless experiences, it works: 84% of shoppers who lean into AI-powered online tools report high satisfaction. That’s why we’re so focused on getting insights from the 2.3 billion consumer interactions we see annually into the hands of our dealer, lender and OEM partners. We know what consumers are looking for, we know what’s working, and we’re building the connected retail experiences that help the industry deliver it.”

Tariffs and Affordability

In 2025, higher tariffs and fears of increasing vehicle prices prompted some buyers to accelerate purchase decisions: According to the study, 34% of new-car buyers and 24% of all buyers said tariffs accelerated their decisions, fueling strong sales in the first half of the year. However, despite widespread expectation that vehicle prices would increase – 81% of new-vehicle shoppers expected tariffs to push vehicle prices higher – overall satisfaction with prices paid remained high.

Top Takeaways:

- **24%** of shoppers decided to buy sooner due to tariffs
- **3%** of shoppers delayed their purchase
- **68%** of buyers who purchased sooner were satisfied with the price paid
- **56%** of shoppers indicated they were opposed to higher tariffs

Another key theme in 2025 is that vehicle ownership was increasingly viewed as a financial burden. The latest CBJ Study found 62% of buyers felt leasing or owning a car is too costly, with high vehicle prices being the top concern. Kelley Blue Book estimates the average new-vehicle manufacturer’s suggested retail price (MSRP) peaked at over \$52,600 in December 2025, while fuel, insurance, maintenance and high interest rates added to the strain.

Key takeaways from the 2025 Cox Automotive Car Buyer Journey Study

1) Car Buying Satisfaction Improves, Hits All-Time High for New-Vehicle Buyers

Shoppers who bought a new or used vehicle in the previous 12 months report improving satisfaction, with 76% of new-vehicle buyers indicating they were highly satisfied with the process, an all-time high. Drivers of the improved scores include better vehicle selection, more efficient shopping processes and smoother dealership experiences.

A clear sign that the car-buying experience is improving: 44% of new-vehicle buyers – an all-time high – and 41% of used-vehicle buyers said their most recent purchase was better than their previous one. Only 6% reported a worse experience, the lowest score in five years. One respondent summed it up well: *"It was seamless from online to dealership. I was able to complete most of it online, including getting a quicker approval."*

Retail auto dealers continue to deliver strong satisfaction levels. Overall dealership satisfaction reached 76% in the latest survey, near the record of 77% set in 2020. Used-vehicle buyer satisfaction climbed to 75%, just shy of its all-time high, while new-vehicle buyer satisfaction remained steady at 81%, matching the record high set in the previous report.

Top Takeaways:

- **71%** of all vehicle buyers were highly satisfied with the process
- **76%** of new-vehicle buyers were highly satisfied, a record high
- **42%** said their experience was better than the last time
- Overall satisfaction with dealership process: **76%**, up 3 points from the previous year
- **81%** of new-vehicle buyers were highly satisfied with their dealership experience

2) Affordability Pressures are Reshaping Buyer Behavior

Record-high prices drove more cross-shopping and interest in leasing, according to the latest research. In 2025, 66% of buyers considered both new and used vehicles, up from 57% previously. Among new-vehicle shoppers, 29% weighed leasing versus buying, an all-time high, with leases typically saving over \$100 per month.

Another trend: Fewer buyers started the shopping process knowing exactly what they want – just 29% were certain on a vehicle, down from 37% in 2020. Yet satisfaction with selection is improving: 62% of buyers report being highly satisfied, up from 36% during the inventory crunch of 2022.

Top Takeaways:

- **66%** of shoppers considered both new and used vehicles
- Among new-vehicle buyers: **43%** considered both new and used, an all-time high
- Among used-vehicle buyers: **74%** considered both new and used
- **29%** of new buyers considered both leasing and buying options, an all-time high
- **71%** of vehicle buyers went into the process with an open mind, unsure of what vehicle they would buy



3) AI Shows Promise in Helping Further Improve Vehicle Buying

Throughout the 2025 CBJ Study, results continually reinforced the fact that “mostly digital buyers” – those who completed more than 50% of the required process online – were the most satisfied vehicle buyers. Research also found that AI is helping the process: While AI usage was relatively modest among all vehicle buyers, those buyers who did engage AI tools reported higher satisfaction, greater trust in dealers, and a faster, easier process.

In its first year of tracking AI usage, Cox Automotive found many vehicle shoppers leaned into AI tools to improve the vehicle buying process, with 19% of all buyers and 25% of new-vehicle buyers using either AI websites (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot) or AI-generated overviews (e.g., Google Overview).

Importantly, shoppers who engaged AI tools reported the highest levels of satisfaction.

Buyers cited real-time answers, personalized recommendations and interactive quizzes as top benefits. Looking ahead, 83% of respondents in the latest survey believe AI will reshape car buying within 10 years, and 63% of dealers agree investing in AI now is critical for long-term success.

Top Takeaways:

- **25%** of new-vehicle buyers engaged AI tools in the shopping process
- **59%** of respondents reported high satisfaction with AI-powered assistance
- **84%** of mostly-digital buyers who engaged AI assistants were highly satisfied with the overall vehicle buying process – among the most satisfied buyers in the survey
- **83%** of consumers say the rise of AI will impact car buying in the future
- **63%** of auto dealers note that investing in AI tools now is critical to success

4) Most Vehicle Buyers Want the Versatility of Omnichannel Retail

Cox Automotive’s annual *Car Buyer Journey Study* continues to show that most buyers don’t want an all-online purchase or a fully in-person transaction. As vehicle buying requires multiple steps, the ideal process appears to be an omnichannel approach – a connected experience that blends online convenience with in-store interaction.

In the latest survey of 2,300 buyers, 53% completed all steps at the dealership, while only 7% bought completely online. When asked about their preference, 63% said an omnichannel approach would be ideal, compared to 28% who want “all online.”

Gaps exist: 48% want to apply for credit online, but only 33% do; 40% want to select F&I products online, yet only 16% do; and just 19% finalize price online despite 37% wanting that option. The takeaway: Opportunities remain for better tools and education to encourage both shoppers and dealers to complete more steps online.

Top Takeaways:

- **53%** bought a vehicle with all required steps in-person at the dealership
- **7%** of buyers report purchasing entirely online
- **63%** agree that the ideal retail experience combines online and in-person activities
- **28%** of respondents say they want to buy all online
- **37%** want to finalize the purchase price online, but only **19%** do



5) Third-Party Websites Remain the Top Destination for Vehicle Buyers

Research shows new-vehicle buyers are increasingly willing to skip automaker and dealer websites in favor of third-party platforms for research, comparisons and cross-shopping. Third-party sites, such as Edmunds, Cars.com and Cox Automotive's Kelley Blue Book and Autotrader, are increasingly the first and last stop in the vehicle shopping process, reinforcing their influence on buyer decisions.

Website Usage by Type

	Total	New	Used
Third Party Websites	75%	70%	77%
Dealership	59%	53%	60%
Search Engines	41%	41%	41%
Used Online Retailer	30%	18%	34%
Social Media	26%	28%	26%
Automaker Websites	25%	33%	22%
AI Site	12%	17%	11%
Avg # of Sites Visited	4.6	4.0	4.8

For more information, see the [2025 Cox Automotive Car Buyer Journey Study Summary](#).

About Cox Automotive

Cox Automotive is the world's largest automotive services and technology provider. Fueled by the largest breadth of first-party data fed by 2.3 billion online interactions a year, Cox Automotive tailors leading solutions for car shoppers, auto manufacturers, dealers, lenders and fleets. The company has 29,000+ employees on five continents and a portfolio of industry-leading brands that include Autotrader®, Kelley Blue Book®, Manheim®, vAuto®, Dealertrack®, NextGear Capital™, CentralDispatch® and Cox Fleet®. Cox Automotive is a subsidiary of Cox Enterprises Inc., a privately owned, Atlanta-based company with \$23 billion in annual revenue. Visit coxautoinc.com or connect via [@CoxAutomotive](#) on X, [CoxAutoInc](#) on Facebook or [Cox-Automotive-Inc](#) on LinkedIn.

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