

Call it a pre-test drive

Virtual auto mall links people to dealers around East Texas

About 15,000 people virtually kick the tires of a car they're considering purchasing each month at EastTexasAutos.com.

They click around the Web site 50,000 to 60,000 times, with each person staying online for about 20 minutes while they surf through the used car inventories of dealers around East Texas.

"We're never going to replace car dealer-ships," said Rod Knighten, owner of EastTexasAutos.com, a site he touts as "East Texas' best selection of pre-owned vehicles."

What he can do is make the process of buying a vehicle more convenient and streamlined, he said.

"We're just now beginning to break the cycle of people having to go to the dealership," Knighten said. "They're realizing they can get a quality product online and then call and make an appointment at the dealership. It's new territory."

Dealers were hesitant about this new territory, he said. They didn't want people to buy online.

"And they're not going to buy online," Knighten said. "They're going to use it as a tool. They're going to go eventually and visit a sales-man and buy from the dealer because they want the service. They want the warranty..."

When Knighten launched the site in May 2003, he had three clients and about 200 cars. His site now features about 2,000 cars for sale at 20 East Texas dealerships. The increase in the number of dealerships using his service reflects a growing number of dealerships that are using the Web in general.



Rod Knighten
Web site owner

"The Internet really has become a research tool for consumers," said Jeff Beddow, spokesman for the National Automobile Dealers Association.

Last year the percentage of new car and truck dealers with a Web site reached an all-time high, the auto dealers association reported.

The association's annual Internet utilization survey showed that 92 percent of new car and truck dealerships had Web sites in 2003, compared with 91 percent in 1999 and 47 percent in 1997.

Of those with sites, 99 percent are interactive and allow car shoppers to view stock, fill out finance forms and schedule sales and service appointments.

"The survey confirms that new car dealers are increasingly using the Internet to make the car-shopping process more convenient for the customer," said Paul Taylor, the association's chief economist, in a written statement issued with the survey results in December. "As more consumers organize their daily lives using the Internet, franchise new-car dealers have made researching, buying and servicing a car online readilyavailable and easy."



Joe Elliot, sales manager for Peters Chevrolet Chrysler Jeep in Longview, said Peters launched its own Web site three or four years ago. It includes new and used cars. "We're certainly sold on it," Elliott said. He said probably more people shop online for pre-owned Cars, but the dealership receives more inquiries about new cars through its Web site.

"We have three people that work in that area and watch it anywhere from three to five times a day so that they can answer any inquiries about specific units and come ask them to come shop with us," Elliott said. The Web site has helped increase sales, he said.

Peters also uses EastTexasAutos.com to list its used inventory, as well as some other sites. The dealership does that even though it has its own site because people like Knighten are promoting their sites, Elliott said.

"There are lots of dealerships doing it, and it gives you that additional exposure," he said. "We're not different than any other retail business doing what we feel like might help us sell another vehicle."

Knighten's site has had good results for the dealership, he said.

"But it's no different than anything else-- if you don't take care of those leads and you don't service that e-mail properly, it's no different than a customer that drives on your lot," Elliott said. "You're not going to sell them."

Knighten's Web site was a natural progression for his business, Rod Knighten Video Production and Advertising, which he opened in 1992.

"Due to the fact that I'd been in the advertising business so long with car dealers as clients, I understood their inventories," Knighten said. "The Internet has changed so much since it really started getting going in the mid-90s that the automation that's available now to access and distribute these dealers' data makes it a lot more user-friendly for me. I saw a way to offer the dealers a service that they would love that would organize and distribute multiple photographs of their data on their Web site, and since I'm doing all the work anyway, why not create an auto mall, a cyber mall called EastTexasAutos.com where through advertising and promotion you drive traffic to where people can take a virtual tour of every automobile online."

His Web site offers shoppers the ability to search for exactly the cars they are looking for by dealership, make, model, year, milage and price. They can take a virtual tour of the cars with eight photos that Knighten's company takes showing the exterior and interior of the car. Shoppers then can call the dealership or e-mail through the Web site.

Knighten's company also offers services he says other Internet sites do not-- window stickers and buyers' guides for cars, for instance. His business is growing. He's added more employees and hopes to move into a 6,100-square-foot facility he is building just outside Longview next month.

