



Maple Hill Auto Group Discovers Custom Strategy and Partnership Is The Key To Driving Sales

Executive Summary:

Maple Hill Auto Group is a multi-franchise dealership based out of Kalamazoo, Mich. When the company began in 1995, they had three brands and 38 employees, and through the years they offered as many as nine different car brands. Today, they sell six different new-car brands and have 99 employees. They were originally advertising with a large digital marketing firm that served only the automotive industry, but all of the marketing solutions they received from the company were cookie-cutter.

"Everything when we were with them was: 'You fit into a group, you are not an individual'," says Jim VandenBerg, the owner and general manager of Maple Hill Auto Group. "We've always felt that we wanted to push the limits in digital and advertising. We wanted to be a leader in what we did."

It was time to find a new marketing agency.

"We wanted to be unique, we wanted to be the tip of the sword and chart new waters. I think that's what Federated Digital Solutions was able to bring to us."

-Jim VandenBerg, owner and general manager of Maple Hill Auto Group

The Problem:

Maple Hill felt like their advertising was just like everyone else on the block and they weren't standing out. At the national automotive marketing agency, Maple Hill was just 1 of up to 100 clients the agency representative handled. The one-on-one relationship was nonexistent. But they were leery about going with a local digital agency.

"We had a terrible experience with a different local agency," says Randi DeSantis, the executive director of Maple Hill Auto Group. "We had already been down that road and been burned by it. We thought we needed a bigger, corporate, automotive entity to take care of us because of that bad experience."

The Problem (cont):

But the team at Maple Hill knew they were missing the local touch in their market. The big agency never asked them how many new cars they were trying to sell a month, how many used cars, or how many of each brand. It was never a conversation about Maple Hill's end game — it was always a numbers game about their click-through rate, and none of it was applicable to what Maple Hill did on a day-to-day basis.

"One thing that Shannon brought to the table with her team at FDS was that they wanted to know our goals," DeSantis says. "They were in here when we first started with them at least twice a month, seeing how their solutions were helping our actual sales."

Driving sales and showing return on investment is crucial, but the national agency wasn't helping Maple Hill sell their cars. They had six new-car brands as well as more than 100 used and certified pre-owned vehicles, but the other agency only wanted to focus on marketing a few limited-inventory vehicles.

When they came to Federated Digital Solutions, Maple Hill was looking to grow their overall units sold, grow the top three or four models of each of their six brands, and sell more used and certified pre-owned vehicles.



The Process:

In order to meet the needs of Maple Hill, the team at Federated Digital Solutions developed a comprehensive strategy for each of the dealership's brands. The plan for each brand included these tactics:

- SEM campaigns
- Branding using digital display advertising targeted to individual audiences, based on each make, model, and message
- Video and OTT/CTV for specific brands
- Content marketing

The team at Federated Digital Solutions created custom audiences for each new vehicle brand featuring their top 3-4 models and then made sure the message and frequency were strong.

Combining the targeted branded messages with a strong SEM campaign was powerful. Consumers interested in buying a new vehicle were delivered digital display ads for the vehicles that best fit them, and the SEM campaigns helped those consumers find Maple Hill Automotive's website easily when they began researching the vehicles later.

This strategy paid off quickly and is continuing to show results. For all 6 brands, Maple Hill now owns 60-90% of total impression share month-after-month.

The Process (cont):

The Federated Digital Solutions team also created three campaigns focused on the certified pre-owned vehicle market. One campaign focuses on Subaru certified pre-owned vehicles and another focuses on certified pre-owned vehicles in general. The third campaign connects to Maple Hill's certified pre-owned inventory feed. These campaigns drive used vehicle sales month over month.

For content marketing, Federated Digital Solutions created a blog campaign that includes a mix of industry announcements, consumer research topics and individual branding. The first quarter content marketing for Maple Hill focuses on the new makes and models available for the year, especially on award-winning vehicles. The content for the rest of the year includes helpful information for consumers throughout the car buying consumer journey, features on the charities Maple Hill supports and industry announcements.

"We've been able to experiment and have open conversations about: 'did this work or didn't it?'," VandenBerg says. "That's the biggest thing we've felt with FDS. They helped us constantly refine and constantly sharpen the blade to get rid of the chaff that just isn't going to make any good progress, and to be able to put an edge, a sharper edge, on things that do work."

Maple Hill also enjoys flexibility through Federated Digital Solutions to adapt to changes and find new ways to market their vehicles that make sense for their local area.



"We were hostages so many times at the other agency, with them spewing numbers at us that we were supposed to be enamored by, but we don't know what they were half the time," DeSantis says. "But FDS showed us everything, asked what we thought was relevant and asked if we'd want to see it again next month. It was always adaptive to what we were trying to do and what we were trying to achieve. We were all on the same team and everyone wanted the same outcome."

"The ideal person to work with FDS is someone who wants to grow their business but doesn't want to sit back and be lazy about it, they want to participate in the advertising. You have to work together as a team."

-Jim VandenBerg, owner and general manager of Maple Hill Auto Group

Maple Hill Auto Group and Federated Digital Solutions work together to identify solutions that will work. That active partnership is what VandenBerg sees as making all the difference in their marketing (and, ultimately, their vehicle sales).

"Federated Digital Solutions is not for the person who wants to be a nonparticipant. You've got to want to be in the mix of things. You've got to want to be involved. You want to spend your money wisely," VandenBerg says. "It takes more work on behalf of us and it takes more work on behalf of FDS to do the business that we're doing, but obviously we feel it pays off. If you're going to try to do that and be an absentee participant, I don't think you're going to get the same results."

The Result:

Subaru is Maple Hill's number one brand. When they started working with Federated Digital Solutions in 2018, they owned 30% of the market share in paid ads. By March 2021, they owned 62% of the total market share in paid ads. Additionally, Maple Hill saw a 32% increase in total Subarus sold from 2019 to 2020. From Q1 2020 compared to Q1 2021, the dealership increased total units sold by 130%!

Maple Hill Automotive also made strides on their certified pre-owned and used vehicles overall. From the start of their relationship with FDS in 2018 to the end of 2020, they increased units sold by 15%.

Maple Hill had a record breaking Q1 in 2021 for certified pre-owned units sold, with an increase of 37% compared to Q1 2019.

It took about a year of partnership to really see the results that Federated Digital Solutions' strategies were driving, but Maple Hill is now all in.

And car sales is not the only area in which Maple Hill is seeing results.

"We used geofencing when we had a big need for technicians, but we were not getting applicants," DeSantis says. "Shannon came up with this really great plan to use geofencing and drive them to an application page. We saw great results from it."

That kind of outside-the-box thinking is helping the dealership grow their business in ways they never would have thought possible with the national automotive marketing agency.

"We've integrated farther than just advertising cars," VandenBerg says. "It's been growth of the business, growth of personnel, and we're now using it in our parts business. It's become more than just car sales."

