

SMALL BUSINESS



photo: MARY PERCE

Michelle Lundy (from left), Charlotte Spraggins and LeeAnn Shattuck set out to create a business that negotiates car purchases for women, but it turns out that 60% of their customers are men.

In the driver's seat

Car-buying service haggles over prices, finds niche

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STAFF WRITER

During her 27-year career in auto sales, Michelle Lundy saw shortcomings in the way the industry sold cars to women.

In their sales pitches, she says, dealers typically stressed horsepower or technology. But female customers are more interested in how a vehicle will make their lives easier and in how safe, economical and reliable it is, Lundy says.

"It says something about buying a car when people compare it to (getting) a root canal," she says.

When Lundy launched Women's Automotive Solutions Inc. in 2003, she saw a business opportunity in easing that pain.

The company finds the make and model of vehicle the customer wants and negotiates the best price with the dealer. LeeAnn Shattuck, president, compares the firm's services to those of a real estate agent.

"We're an advocate for the dealers, too," Shattuck says. "They have a right to make a fair profit. They're a business. The key word there is 'fair.'"

The client pays Women's Automotive Solutions a \$300 fee for its services, and the company also receives a \$200 referral fee from the dealership when a car is sold.

Starting the business enabled Lundy to ease her own pain as well. She has lupus, an autoimmune disease. Long hours and complications

QUICKINFO

WOMEN'S AUTOMOTIVE SOLUTIONS INC.

Business: Operates a car-buying service
Founded: 2003
HQ: 2597 Lower Assembly Drive, Fort Mill 29708
Principals: Michelle Lundy, founder; Charlotte Spraggins, chief executive; and LeeAnn Shattuck, president
Employees: 3
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from the illness prompted her to leave her previous job as general manager of Executive Auto Sales in Rock Hill. Starting the car-buying service allowed Lundy to work from her home and gave her much more flexible hours.

For the business to grow, however, she needed help. She found it last year, when Shattuck and Charlotte Spraggins bought into the business, each paying a \$10,000 licensing fee to operate Women's Automotive Solutions.

Shattuck, previously an information-technology consultant, was seeking a new career. And Spraggins had just returned to Charlotte from California following a divorce.

The company has quickly built a loyal following. Recent client Stacy Carter recalls visiting an auto dealership with her husband. She would ask all the questions, but the sales staff directed its answers to her husband.

In working with Women's Automotive Solutions, Carter says she didn't have to deal with such issues — and she ended up paying substantially less for the Honda CRV she bought.

"She talks the language," Carter says of Shattuck. "She has the respect" of car dealers.

Women's Automotive Solutions has also earned the respect of some customers Lundy didn't originally target. It turns out about 60% of the company's clients are men.

Says Shattuck: "We're thinking of running an ad that says, 'Yes, we help men, too.'"

LESSON LEARNED:

When health problems forced Michelle Lundy to scale back her auto-sales career, she launched a company that helps buyers navigate the car-buying process.