

THE

2027 Automotive Customer Report

New BBB research on how customers find, compare and choose an auto business

BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU

WHY WE DID THIS RESEARCH

Better Business Bureau has spent a long time helping people know which businesses are worth their trust. Choosing an automotive business is one of the harder versions of that decision. The service or purchase is often expensive, most people cannot evaluate it themselves, and it usually happens with a business they have never used.

We surveyed automotive customers about how they make that choice.

What we learned is that they take it seriously. Nearly every customer we surveyed compared more than one business before deciding, and most compared three or more. Even so, two out of three told us they chose an automotive business based on reviews or word of mouth and were disappointed with the experience. That information is what customers rely on most often, and it only says how a business treated somebody else, on a different car, on a different day.

> *A customer can only learn so much from other customers. The rest depends on what a business is willing to show them.*

Customers told us in detail what raises their confidence, and when in the process it matters, and most of it is within reach of any business already doing good work. An estimate written so a person can read it. Photographs when the repair gets expensive. A call while the job is still going, even when there is nothing much to report.

Those are small operational habits, and they turn out to carry more weight than almost anything a business can say about itself. Customers notice when a business works that way, and they come back to it.

That is the work BBB does. We review a business and its track record to confirm it operates honestly and with integrity, so customers feel confident before approving a repair or making a purchase they cannot easily judge for themselves.

I see businesses that already operate in the way their customers want. The hard part is proving that to someone who is not yet a customer.

The pages ahead show where your customers are looking, what they are comparing, and what they need to see from you. I hope you find it useful.

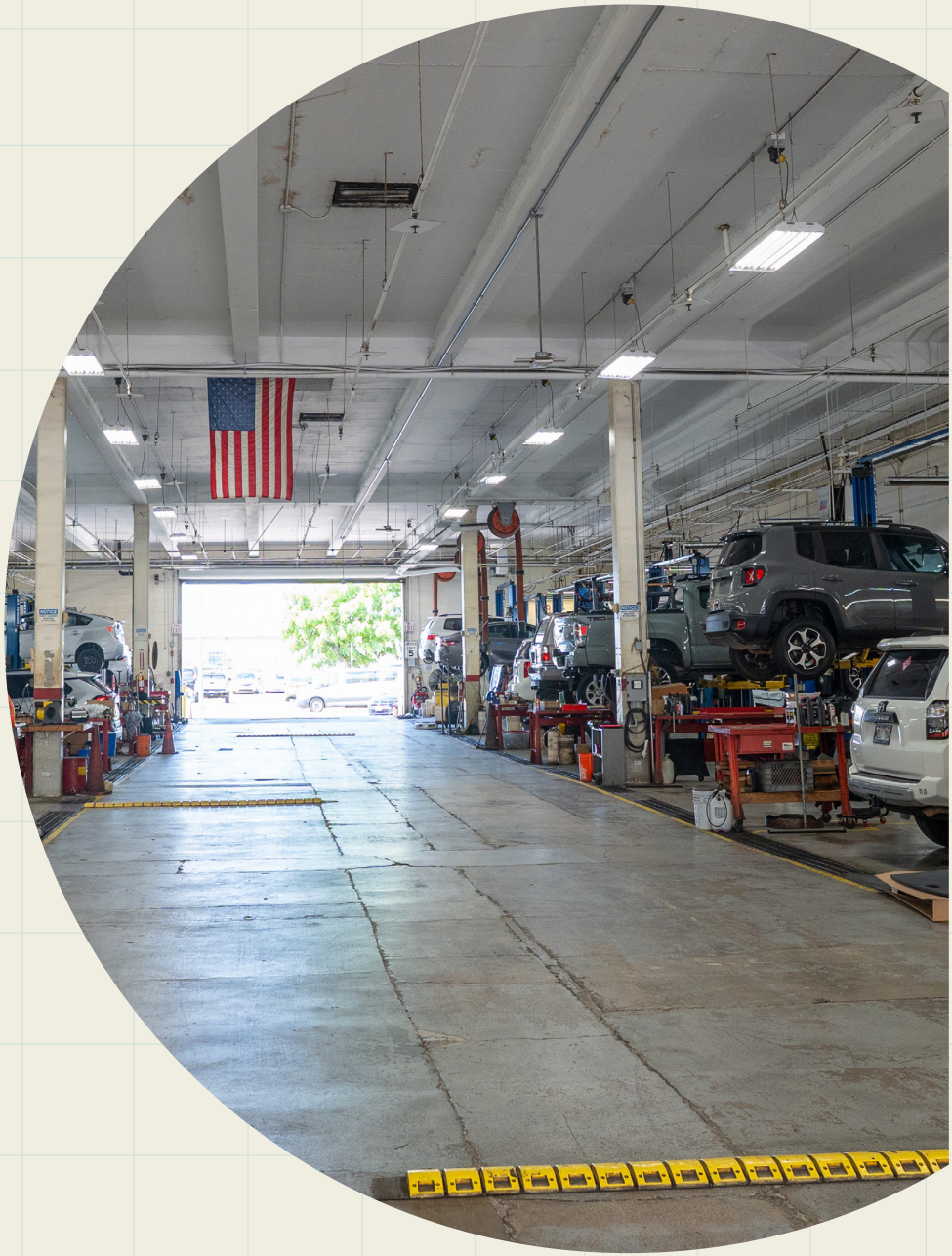


Tyler Andrew
President & CEO
BBB Great West + Pacific

Introduction

How customers choose an automotive business has changed. The search has fragmented across referrals, search engines, review sites, and social platforms. AI tools have entered the process for younger customers, and nearly everyone now compares multiple businesses before deciding.

In 2026, BBB Great West + Pacific commissioned a study of recent automotive customers across the western United States to understand the choices they make when selecting an automotive business.



Key areas of exploration

- → Why customers who research carefully still report being disappointed
- → Where customers look for an automotive business, and how that differs by age
- → What evidence raises a customer's confidence, and when in the process it matters

What's Inside

How customers find you now

- Searches run across many channels, and only referrals and traditional search reach at least half of automotive customers.
- Nearly half of customers ages 25 to 40 use AI tools to find a business, compared with 7% of customers over 55.
- Almost every customer researches more than one business, and 65% research three or more.

Why all that research still ends in disappointment

- Two out of three automotive customers chose a business on reviews or word of mouth and were disappointed.
- A bad experience does not change what customers look for in the next business, only how hard they look.
- Four out of five would cancel or avoid booking after finding negative reviews or unanswered complaints.
- Customers who have been let down by a business are more likely than others to return to and recommend one that is transparent and reliable.

What proof looks like

- Clear pricing leads every factor customers said builds trust, at 77%.
- Documentation matters more as the cost rises. 35% of customers facing a cost under $750 say it significantly raises their confidence. Over $1,500, that rises to 58%.
- Half of customers would return to a transparent business over a cheaper competitor, and more would recommend one.

Who this report is for

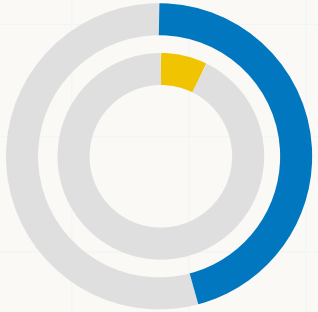
- Auto repair shop owners
- Dealer service departments
- Body shops
- Fixed operations directors
- Automotive service managers
- Multi-location automotive business leaders
- Auto dealerships, franchise and independent

How Customers Find You Now

Customers are searching across referrals, search engines, review sites, social platforms, and AI tools, and where they look depends on how old they are.



Younger customers are finding businesses through AI



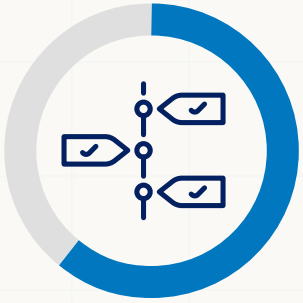
46%

of automotive customers ages 25 to 40 use AI tools to discover businesses, compared with only

7%

of customers over age 55.

Reviews are the first credibility check you face



61%

of automotive customers consider recent reviews very important when deciding whether to use a business for the first time.

No single channel reaches everyone

Automotive customers typically discover new businesses through:

60%	Referral from friends or family
51%	Traditional search engines
47%	Customer review websites
38%	Social media
34%	AI search tools
31%	Online advertisements
13%	Referral from another business
12%	Local directories



Reputation decides who survives the first cut



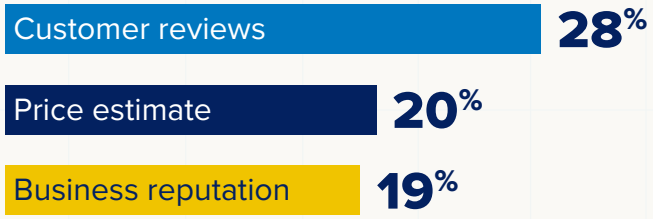
65%

of automotive customers find customer reviews and business reputation very important when narrowing options for businesses discovered online.



Reviews outweigh price when customers pick a business

Asked what matters most when scheduling service with an unfamiliar auto business, customers say:



Most customers are weighing you against two other businesses



96%

of automotive customers research more than one business before making a decision, and

65%

research three or more.

What this means for your business

1



Search your business the way a customer would. Check Google, a review site, and an AI assistant, and read what comes back. Then search by service and city. Note what is out of date, what is missing, and what a customer would conclude.

2



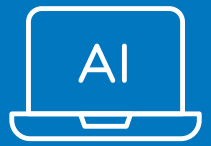
Claim and complete every listing, not just the one you check. No single channel reaches everyone. Referrals lead at **60%**, search follows at **51%**, review sites at **47%**. A business that is easy to find in one place is invisible in the others customers are checking.

3



Ask every customer for a review, not just the ones you expect to be happy. A full mix of reviews shows the real experience your business delivers. Recent reviews are very important to **61%** of customers, so praise from three years ago matters less than new ones.

4



If your customers skew younger, an AI assistant is summarizing you to them. That summary is pulled from the same listings, reviews, and complaint boards everyone else reads, so the work is the same. The difference is that a customer takes the summary at face value.

2027 AUTOMOTIVE CUSTOMER REPORT

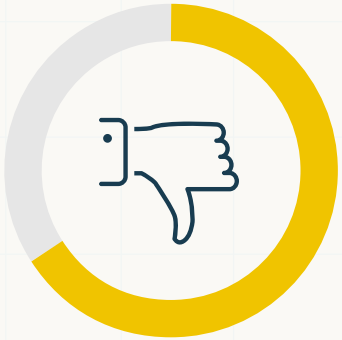
How to Build Trust and Avoid Disappointment

Customers research carefully and are disappointed anyway, because reviews and word of mouth are the best information most of them have, and neither can tell them how their own experience will go.



Two out of three customers have been let down by a business they researched

66%



of automotive customers have selected an auto business based primarily on reviews or word-of-mouth recommendations and then been disappointed with the experience.

These are not customers who chose at random. They followed the indicators most people rely on, and those did not predict their experience. A review is written after the fact, by someone whose visit is already over. It records how a business treated another customer, which is useful, but not the same as knowing how it will treat the next one.

Disappointment does not change what customers look for

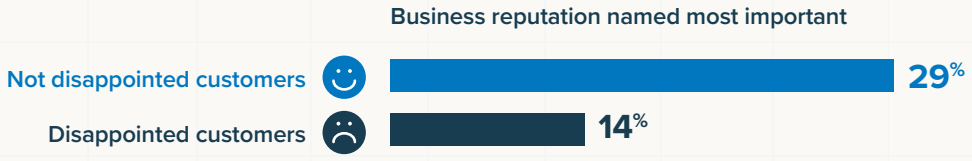
Across every trust measure in this survey, customers who were let down by an automotive business answered almost identically to customers who were not.

Being let down does not teach a customer to look for something different. It teaches them to look harder at the same things, which is what keeps the cycle going. Reviews and word of mouth are still what they reach for first, so they go back to both, and some of them are disappointed again.

	Recent reviews very important	Documentation raises confidence	Surprise charges
Disappointed customers	61%	45%	64%
Not disappointed customers	58%	48%	61%

The one exception

Asked to pick the single most important factor when choosing an unfamiliar business, customers who have never been let down chose business reputation most often, at **29%**.



A disappointed customer is worth more to you, not less

The instinct is to treat these customers as harder to win. The data points the other way.

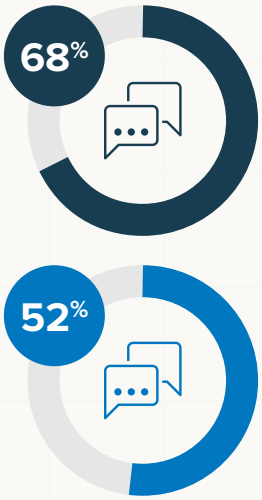
Among customers who have been disappointed before,

58% say they would return to a transparent, reliable business even when a competitor is cheaper, compared with

42% of customers who have never had that experience.

On recommending a business that communicates clearly and documents its work, it is **68%** against **52%**.

A customer who has been let down before knows what the alternative looks like, which appears to make the difference more obvious to them when a business gets it right.



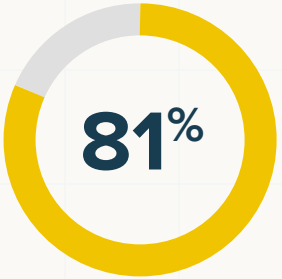
Customers who use AI search report more disappointment

Among customers who discover businesses through AI search,

76% have been disappointed after choosing a business based on reviews or word of mouth, compared with

61% of customers who do not discover businesses through AI search.

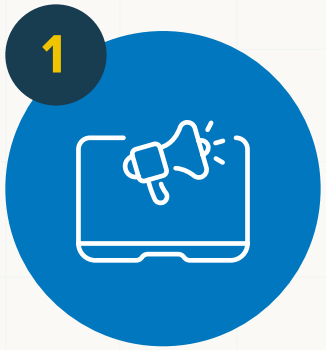
Unresolved complaints stop customers from booking



of automotive customers would be likely or very likely to cancel or avoid scheduling service after finding negative reviews or unanswered complaints online.

A negative review is someone else's opinion. An unanswered complaint is a decision you made, and it is the half a business controls. A complaint with a documented resolution attached reads differently than one left in silence.

What this means for your business



Respond to every negative review, including the old ones. The response is not for the person who wrote it. It is for the next customer reading the thread, deciding whether a bad day at your business is a pattern or an exception.



Answer open complaints wherever they are posted, and say how you addressed the issue. A complaint with a resolution attached reads differently than one sitting in silence.



Assume a first-time customer arrives skeptical. Two out of three have already been let down by a business they researched carefully, and that skepticism is not something you can talk them out of.

Customers read a complaint and its response together.

What Proof Looks Like

Reviews get a customer in the door. What a business shows them from that point on decides whether they go ahead, come back, and recommend it. The more expensive the decision, the more they need to see.



The 9 factors that build customer trust

Nothing builds trust like a price a customer can understand.

77% Clear pricing and estimates

56% Positive customer reviews

47% Long-standing reputation

46% Warranty coverage

46% Recommendations from friends or family

39% Responsive customer service

38% Photos or documentation of repairs

36% Professional certifications

34% Frequent communication updates



A surprise charge is the fastest way to lose a customer



63%

of automotive customers strongly agree that surprise charges are one of the fastest ways for an auto business to lose their trust.

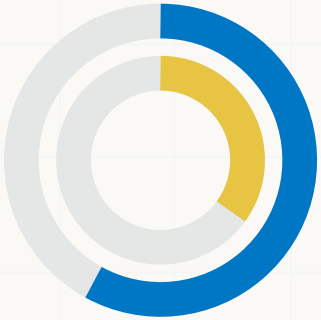
Customers approve what they can see



47%

of automotive customers say photos, estimates, and repair documentation significantly increase their confidence when approving expensive vehicle repairs.

The bigger the price tag, the more proof customers need



58%

of customers say photos, estimates, and repair documentation significantly increase their confidence, for estimates over $1,500.

That compares with

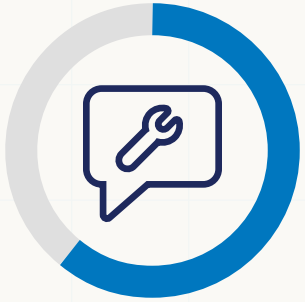
35%

of customers considering repairs under $750.

Getting them in the door and getting a yes are two separate decisions

Communications about a cost the customer did not expect, along with photos and written estimates make it easier to say yes.

Updates along the way decide whether customers return



62%

of automotive customers say consistent status updates throughout the repair process are very important in deciding whether they keep using the same business.

Customers will drive farther for a business they trust



55%

of automotive customers consider trustworthiness much more important than convenience or proximity when choosing a business.

Transparency keeps customers and earns referrals

52%

of automotive customers would be very likely to return to a business they have used before if the experience was transparent and reliable, even when a competitor offers a lower price.

63%

of automotive customers would be very likely to recommend a business that provides clear communication, transparent pricing, and detailed repair documentation.



Loyalty grows with the size of the job

Among customers facing estimates over $1,500,



63%

would return to a transparent business rather than take a lower price elsewhere, compared with

42%

on smaller jobs.

Where the evidence runs out

The estimate, the photographs, the published rates, and the updates during the job, those all come from the business itself.

Everything else, the only other information a customer has, comes from other customers, written after the work was already finished.

66%

of customers chose a business on reviews or word of mouth and were disappointed by the experience.



What this means for your business

1



Put a written estimate in the customer's hands, with parts and labor separated. Clear pricing came in first on the list of what builds trust, ahead of reviews and reputation.

2



The higher the price, the more customers need to see. Photos and documentation significantly raise confidence for **35%** of customers on estimates under **$750**, and **58%** on estimates over **$1,500**.

3



If the cost changes, communicate the difference. According to this research, **63%** of customers strongly agree a surprise charge is the fastest way to lose their trust.

4



Publish what you charge, including your diagnostic fee. A customer who has to call for a cost will often turn elsewhere, and **96%** compare more than one business.

5



Send updates while the job is underway, even when there is nothing to report. Asked what influences whether they keep using the same business, **62%** of customers favor consistent status updates.

66%

chose on reviews and were disappointed

Two out of three automotive customers selected a business based on reviews or a recommendation and were disappointed with the experience. Nearly all compared more than one business, and two-thirds compared three or more.

81%

would avoid a business over unanswered complaints

Negative reviews and unanswered complaints turn customers away. A complaint with a documented resolution attached reads differently than one left without a response.

77%

name clear pricing as a trust factor

Clear pricing and estimates rank ahead of every other trust factor, including reviews and long-standing reputation.

58%

need more proof as the cost rises

Documentation matters more as the price increases, rising from 35% of customers facing costs under $750 to 58% of those facing estimates over $1,500.

55%

say trust beats convenience

For more than half of customers, trustworthiness matters much more than convenience or proximity. They will drive past a closer business for one they know they can count on.

Methodology

BBB Great West + Pacific commissioned independent research firm TrendCandy to survey 100 consumers in July 2026 who had recently used or shopped for automotive services and who lived in Alaska, Hawai‘i, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, or Washington.

The research examined how trust, transparency, communication, reputation, and operational performance influence how customers choose an automotive business. These respondents were one of three consumer groups in a 300-person study.

Respondents were sourced through online research panels in a double-blind survey and compensated for their participation. The margin of error is plus or minus 9.8 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. All sub-sample breakout data is directional only.

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The proof customers look for is BBB Accreditation.



BBB Accreditation puts your business where customers compare their options.

- **Trust customers can see.** The Accredited Business Seal shows a customer your business has been vetted and verified to operate with honesty and integrity. Put it on your website, your window, your ads, and anywhere else your customers are looking.
- **A profile built to be found.** Your Accredited Business Profile gives customers the full picture of what you do in the moment it matters. It shows up higher in Google searches, and is prioritized when customers search on BBB.org.
- **A track record customers can check.** Your rating, your reviews, and your complaint history sit on your profile, with your responses attached to them, so a customer sizing you up gets the whole picture in one visit.

BBB Accreditation shows customers why your business is the right choice.

- **Ask for reviews, then answer them.** BBB Customer Reviews let you request feedback from customers and respond from a single login. Your replies live on your Accredited Business Profile, where interested customers are reading.
- **Every complaint gets your response.** A complaint on BBB.org comes to you first, and when answered, it's posted alongside the complaint. Future customers will see how you handled and communicated issues.
- **Resolutions that keep customers.** BBB assists as an impartial third party through conciliation, mediation, and arbitration, so disputes get settled. The customer stays yours, and your reputation stays strong.



See if your business qualifies for BBB Accreditation.

https://thebbb.org/driving-trust