

How to Turn Tariff Turmoil Into Boosted Sales – and Build Trust in the Process



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As chief marketing officer of the Tim Moran Auto Group, which runs Ford, Chevrolet and Hyundai dealerships, I've discovered the hard way that the best marketing campaigns don't always originate in the boardroom, but in the news cycle.

Recently, news of fresh 25% tariffs against imported vehicles and automotive parts lit up the headlines and sent shock and confusion throughout the business community. Decisions like these can ripple through global supply chains, dealer inventories and customer bank accounts. But for companies that move quickly, changes in policy can also turn into moments of connection, urgency and growth.

In our situation, consumer behavior was directly affected by the announcement. The day after the news became public, we saw traffic to our dealerships surge. Phones rang nonstop. Customers were suddenly jolted into an action that they had deferred for weeks.” The message was obvious: urgency had washed into the market, and we had to act.

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What tariffs on cars would mean for the auto industry

Tariffs, in essence, increase the cost of importing vehicles and parts. Domestic production has cushioned some of the blow, though a lot of vehicles continue to depend on parts or manufacturing procedures that come from abroad. For dealers, that could mean higher wholesale prices, tightened inventory and some models cutting into consumers’ budgets, making cars less affordable.

But here’s the catch: Those increases won’t occur overnight. There’s a window – some days, some weeks – where it’s unaffected, whatever the current inventory happens to be. And there is a huge marketing opportunity in that window.

We saw it firsthand. Staring down tariffs, we initiated campaigns encouraging customers to “lock in current pricing before prices went up.” Our messaging was all about transparency and value: “These vehicles, they’re on the lot now at today’s prices. They will probably cost more in the months ahead. Act now.” We were not fearmongering – we were providing our customers with a heads-up and helping them to make informed decisions.

Three brands, one clear message

While each brand we represent – Ford, Chevrolet and Hyundai – brings its own strategy to the table, they're all preparing for the same reality: potential price increases driven by incoming tariffs that could impact parts, manufacturing and ultimately, sticker prices. That's why our group's message is simple and urgent: Get in now, while current on-lot inventory is still protected from these changes. Once that inventory is gone, replacements could cost thousands more – and no one can say for certain how steep those increases might be.

Ford has leaned in with one of the strongest consumer incentives we've seen in years: employee pricing for everyone through July. That alone creates a major opportunity for savings before any tariff-related effects are felt. We've emphasized that this is a rare moment – with deep discounts available now, and a finite window before future inventory may carry higher costs due to global sourcing.

Chevrolet and Hyundai, meanwhile, are both offering aggressive financing programs across popular models. These offers give customers a way to lock in low rates on current inventory before any upstream cost increases work their way into pricing. Our messaging has focused on clarity: All three brands will likely feel some level of tariff impact, especially when it comes to parts and production costs. So the time to act – to save and secure the best value – is before those effects ripple through the supply chain.

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Marketing in uncertain times

When you're in the middle of a fast-moving story like this one, clarity and nimbleness are essential. We leveraged

various platforms – email, paid search, social media and even radio – to communicate a consistent message: Tick-tock, time's a-wasting. Customers seemed to appreciate the forthrightness. We weren't pushing products to meet targets; we gave them the opportunity to front-run the system before prices moved.

We've had success with strategies such as:

- **Time-locked events:** "Tariff Countdown Sales" and "Beat the Price Hike" weekends built urgency and provided a clear rallying point for our teams.
- **Incentive layering:** Adding the tariff message to existing rebates or financing programs made the deals seem even more attractive.
- **Concise deadlines:** Whether it was a deadline for a tariff or the close of a promotion, we were always crystal clear when customers would no longer be able to take advantage and why they must act now.

And, perhaps most important, we taught our sales teams to have conversations, not just close sales. We armed them with talking points about how tariffs might affect pricing down the line and how current offers could help customers get ahead of those price increases. This helped build trust and establish our team as trusted advisors, not mere salespeople.

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Sage advice for entrepreneurs of every variety

The auto industry may feel the impact of tariffs most acutely, but the larger strategy we used can work for any business.

Here's some advice for entrepreneurs who want to capitalize on external events as marketing fodder:

- **Stay plugged into the news.** Having ripplecalling here means that, say, if there are legislative changes, economic changes or changes around the world, that affect your industry, you can end up seeing ripple effects through it. The quicker you can spot those changes, the quicker you can craft the judicious value-based message.
- **Create urgency with truth.** Here are the only two things that motivate people: scarcity and deadlines – but only when they're real. Don't invent panic. Rather, describe to your customers how an event (such as a tariff or new regulation) will impact your prices, availability or service offerings – and be upfront while you do so.
- **Frame the case in terms of what's good for the customer.** Instead of "We need to move inventory," it's "You can save money by buying before X happens." Articulate the benefit and put your customer first.
- **Spend time building campaigns and testing everything.** Some of our messaging was about "tariff alerts," while other sessions delved into more traditional, seasonal language. Through A/B testing, we learned what angle is most relatable to various segments, and we adapted accordingly.
- **Lead with value, not fear.** But it doesn't have to all be bad. Emphasize what your customers get by acting now, not just what they lose by waiting.

In a constantly changing news world, agility is one of the most powerful weapons in a marketer's arsenal. The tariffs are only one example, but the principles we used work whether you are selling cars, real estate, software or services. When the winds of change from the outside are blowing into your industry, do not turn back. Step up, speak clearly and turn that moment into momentum.

We don't control the news. But we do have control over how we react to it – and that's where true opportunity resides.

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