

Website drives up car sales

Dealers say customers drawn by Mankato-based MinnesotaCars.com have an idea of what they want

By Dan Nienaber
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MANKATO — When Theresa McLaughlin decided it was time to get her next used car, it didn't help her much to have car lots in the area overflowing with trade-ins.

She was looking for the car that is to automobiles what the 8-track tape is to the music industry. She was looking for a station wagon.

The quest could have involved several weekends combing car lots throughout southern Minnesota or the Twin Cities looking for the Mercury Sable wagon that McLaughlin really wanted. Or, worse, it could have meant settling for a vehicle she didn't want.

But an Internet business started in Mankato five years ago, called MinnesotaCars.com, kept her from having to do either. The potentially daunting job was reduced to several clicks of a computer mouse, a few telephone calls and two trips to Austin.

"It was great; I didn't have to waste time or mileage or anything," McLaughlin said. "I only had to look at the good possibilities."

MinnesotaCars.com allows customers to use the Internet to check out thousands of new and used vehicles in a database built up by private sellers and more than 135 area dealerships. Hundreds of new listings are added each week.

Using the Web site's search system, buyers can narrow their search by type of vehicle, make and model, year, price and mileage. Buyers can also enter a zip code and narrow their search to vehicles in an area ranging from 25 miles away to the entire region, which now stretches into northern Iowa.

That's an area owners Mike and Jules Nolan recently added to their system by buying a similar company there.

MinnesotaCars.com is a project the Nolans have been working on since 1995, when Mike Nolan still owned a radio station in Mankato. He was already working with local car dealerships that brought ads through the station. It was 1995 that he

Crunching the numbers

Here are a few statistics from the MinnesotaCars.com Web site:

■ A vehicle is viewed every 7.5 seconds between 8 a.m. and midnight.

■ The average visit to the site lasts 12 minutes and 24 seconds.

■ Most Website hits came during the nighttime hours when the company started in 1997. Now daytime hits, or office surfing hits, equal home views.

■ MinnesotaCars.com has gone from averaging 10,000 vehicle views per month in 1998 to more than 240,000 views per month now.

■ There are more than 135 dealers using the site and 1,100 private sellers buy ads each year.

talked five of them — Snell Motors, Mankato Ford, Heintz Motors, Austin Ford and Dick Olson Motors of Madelia — into spending about \$400 each to help get the Web site started.

"I told them, 'You've done dumber things than this with \$400,'" Mike Nolan said.

For Michael Rstom, Mankato Ford president, it was an easy decision.

He was already looking for a way to make his used vehicle inventory available to Ford's corporate offices and other dealerships through the Internet. The same information used for MinnesotaCars.com could also be used for that purpose. And Nolan is also willing to forward the information to other Internet competitors such as Car Soup and the Auto Trader.

It doesn't bother Rstom that MinnesotaCars.com is sending some customers, including McLaughlin, out of town to do business. He said he more than makes up for it with the customers who are drawn to Mankato by the service.

The Web site also helps Mankato Ford by giving customers a way to educate themselves about the vehicle they want before visiting the dealership, he said. A high percentage of the people who inquire about a vehicle through MinnesotaCars.com turn into buyers if they visit the lot. About 350 vehicles were sold that way through the dealership last year.

Nolan credits a decision to hire Jeff Van Hee as a sales manager in 1997 for much of the



Pat Christman

Jay Zabel is using Mankato-based MinnesotaCars.com to sell his Mercedes-Benz.

company's rapid growth. Van Hee, who owns 5 percent of the company, has logged \$96 million in sales.

By far, 2002 was the biggest year for growth, Nolan said. The company has acquired the Iowa company that designed its software. Nolan has also started publishing his own catalog to

compete with Auto Trader. His Internet customers pay an extra fee to be in the catalog, which is sold at convenience stores.

Jay Zabel said he is using MinnesotaCars.com, along with classified ads in The Free Press, to sell his car, which he admits is a vehicle for which there is only a small number of

potential buyers. He's selling a 1996 Mercedes-Benz E320 with about 136,000 miles.

He hasn't received a single call yet.

"It's kind of an esoteric car — it's not for everyone — so I have to have some patience," Zabel said. "I'm going to have to hit the right person at the right time."