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## Device Tells Drivers, Dealers When Something's Wrong

*Dealer Connect continuously scans a vehicle's operating status.  
It reports problems via a smartphone app.*

Steven Torok owns a nice but fussy '54 MG. "It runs like a fine Swiss watch as long as the ambient temperature is between 68 and 80, and the relative humidity is under 40%," jokes the CEO of Autonet Mobile, which bills itself as the first Internet service provider for cars. Because of its relative antiquity, the British MGTF sports car is too old for Autonet's new platform product, Dealer Connect. It uses a small OBD-II device that fits into a diagnostic-related portal under the dashboard of vehicles built since 1996. It then continuously scans the vehicle's operating status and reports problems. It allows dealers and car owners (via a smartphone app) to access the car's vehicle diagnostic and safety data. Dealers can identify service issues, send alerts, schedule service appointments and push targeted offers based on the car's needs.

Dealer Connect sends diagnostic information to car owners' smartphones.

"We're selling car connectivity," says Torok, who held various posts, including vice president-strategy and business development, during a 30-year career at Chrysler and then DaimlerChrysler. Autonet centers on dealers as primary customers who would install the device in cars on the sales lots, first to track inventory. Then, post-sale, the dealer would tout the Dealer Connect as a value-added offering to car buyers. Autonet says the system puts dealers "first in line" to offer vehicle service work. "From the customer standpoint, the device, bought by and installed by the dealer, comes with the car," he says. "We decided early on we want to work with and through dealers." The cost is \$125 for the device and a 2-year subscription plan. After that, the annual subscription fee is \$30, with dealers deciding if they want to cover that. Torok and Autonet President Sterling Pratz cite Dealer Connect functions they say help dealers. The first, Vehicle Health Scan, is a running checkup on a vehicle's well-being. It provides alerts when a customer's car needs repairs or preventative maintenance. For car owners, "this appeals to someone who says, 'I don't want to be bothered unless it's important,'" Torok adds. Second, an automated scheduler directly connects to the dealer-management system, or the store's computer operating system. Customer service appointments can be made without phone calls or direct mail. Moreover, dealers can text or email marketing messages that coincide with the service alerts, Pratz says. "We're experimenting with coupons. For example, if a brake problem is detected, the dealer can send a coupon for brake repairs." Third, a lot tracker provides location identification while a vehicle is in a dealership's inventory. Torok says that's especially helpful at large dealerships. Later, car owners can use the tracker on their smartphones to locate their cars.

Autonet considers itself as an Internet service provider more than a device maker, Pratz says. "We saw an unopened window. Dealers wanted to get in on this; they wanted a system to communicate more with the car, particularly if something was wrong with it."

The device on a sold car doesn't run without owner approval. "Most customers will grant permission," Torok says. "Not many people would say 'no' to something that checks their car for problems 24/7."

Mark Snethkamp, dealer principal at Snethkamp Auto Group in metro Detroit says, "This is a unique opportunity. We will have this included in the 'Snethkamp Loyalty Package' with our customers."

Pratz is optimistic more dealers will do the same. "Our goal is to change the way dealers communicate with their customers," he says "Right now, 1,000 devices are out there through a dozen dealers. Dealers started ordering before we finished our pilot tests. The potential is for dealers to put them in every car."

Likewise, Torok is thinking big. He envisions sales surpassing 1 million units. As a former executive at a major automaker, "I'm used to dealing with things on a large scale."

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