Toyota Motor Corp. has been known as a relatively conservative automaker when it comes to new technology in its cars. It would rather get the tech right than be first, the argument goes. When it comes to retail technology, it seems the Japanese automaker is taking a more proactive-but-still-measured approach.

Last week in Las Vegas, the automaker showed its Toyota and Lexus dealers a software suite called SmartPath, which is essentially an omnichannel offering that it’s been building in-house for two years and is piloting at seven stores in the U.S.

SmartPath is aimed at letting customers shop, buy, finance and schedule service from wherever they have an Internet connection. The software relays where the customers are in the shopping process to salespeople at the dealership, where they pull up all the information on a tablet device.

If that all sounds familiar it’s because there are several retailers and software vendors pitching and pushing this same kind of omnichannel cohesion. The idea is to provide a seamless buying experience, whether the consumer is shopping from a computer, mobile device or in the store.
If other automakers followed suit, what would happen to these retailers and software companies? Retailers would presumably be able to choose whichever approach they deemed best suits them. But it could spell doom for some of the vendors. Dealers already have been trying to streamline their rosters of companies providing such tools and software anyway.

The (potentially) good news for any omnichannel retail vendor reading this is that Toyota and Lexus dealers won’t be mandated to use the SmartPath system, and the ones who do will eventually be charged.

And Toyota is still very much in the beginning stages with SmartPath and has duly encountered the same issues as others who have treaded in the space. As Bill Fay, senior vice president for automotive operations at Toyota Motor North America, told Automotive News Staff Reporter Larry P. Vellequette: “There are lots of challenges in aligning CRMs, DMSs and the overall dealer websites into what we’re doing, so it becomes a complicated technological exercise to be able to work out all those bugs, have it work the way the customer would expect it to work and then scale it out across our dealers.”

-- David Muller

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