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Pinewood has just made vehicle health check software available through its Pinnacle system for dealers, added free of charge. Many of its customers were using VHC health-check software from a third party.

Pinewood added the VHC system to Pinnacle at the end of 2009 and has achieved more than 50% penetration among its dealer customer base.

Briggs continued: "Reports from dealer groups indicate that the additional profits generated by using the Pinnacle VHC are, in effect, paying for or exceeding the entire monthly charge that we make for using the DMS.

"We are expecting many more of our customers to start using the VHC system within the next few months. Many, or even most, who have not done so to date are tied into third party VHC software contracts, but have indicated they will switch to Pinnacle as soon as their commitment ends."

Gemini Systems, a DMS provider with 2,000 users in the UK, says it has an open door policy with third party suppliers.

Carl Roberts, sales and marketing manager at Gemini, said: "Our door is completely open. We don't always know all the answers so if there's another company that's invented a new wheel, we would be happy to add that to our own offering.

"Our future is absolutely linked to the success of dealers so anything we can do to make them successful we'll support."

Gemini also has a VHC system incorporated with its own DMS and said that if there were ever any other features missing that dealers wanted, they would either develop it themselves or work with another company, if the particular idea garnered enough support from customers.

Roberts said: "We've set up a forum for all our users to voice opinions on what new software they would like to see. If there's enough support behind an idea there's no reason why we wouldn't develop it.

"We have the luxury of being a relatively small team of 32 people so if we want to make a change to our system we can react instantly. A lot of bigger companies are so massive it's like trying to steer an ocean liner."

Logan Naidoo, an aftersales manager at Scotthall Borehamwood BMW before moving to Progress DMS as sales director in February, believes improving CSI scores is reliant on having a good DMS.

Progress DMS works separately from a dealer's main DMS and is specifically focused on aftersales. The system currently has 100 users, including Sytner, Porsche Retail Group, Peter Vardy and Jardine Motor Group. The company is also developing other modules – like a used car programme which it developed for HR Owen.

Naidoo said: "The aftersales department has to be running at 100% absorption in most dealerships to take the slack from the sales department. So it's important a customer's progress through that process is monitored closely.

'Anything we can do to make dealers successful we'll support'

Carl Roberts, Gemini

"When I was working as a dealer, I would do everything my manufacturer was asking of me to raise our CSI, but quite often there wouldn't be a big enough improvement for the amount of effort we were putting in. It wasn't the fault of the people in the dealership; the tools just weren't available to make the process for our aftersales customers as smooth as it should have been."

Naidoo said his dealer background helps him understand the frustrations of his customers when it comes to DMS. He said: "There was always a constant frustration when I was working in the dealership when the DMS would only take you so far in the process and then it would just leave you stranded."

Dealers are often at the mercy of their manufacturer when it comes to which DMS they work with and what additional systems are preferred. Naidoo said it was manufacturers that had the potential power to drive through changes for dealers.

Naidoo said: "A dialogue needs to be opened and we need to get the industry talking about this problem."

AM poll: Would you change your current dealer management system if you could?

YES 71% NO 29%

Comments from the poll:

"Our DMS doesn't interface with anything and there's generally poor service and back-up."

"The answer is yes and I have just been encouraged to do so by the relationship with my current DMS who is no longer supporting its software. I've put a deadline in position of October this year."

"I think our DMS is the best thing since sliced bread."

"Our DMS provider has doubled what it charges. It's no longer the product for small dealers and the extra modules you have to add on are prohibitive because of the cost involved."