



Power Shift AI asked AI about the recent 2026 NADA show and here is what is said:

THE AI REVOLUTION COMES TO LAS VEGAS

Inside NADA Show 2026: Where Automotive Retail Gets Real About Artificial Intelligence

By the numbers, NADA Show 2026 was massive. By the conversations, it was transformational.

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When 20,000+ automotive professionals descended on the Las Vegas Convention Center this February, they weren't just attending another trade show. They were witnessing—and actively participating in—the most significant technological shift the dealership industry has seen in decades. The 2026 NADA Show wasn't about whether artificial intelligence would transform automotive retail. It was about how, when, and which dealers would lead the way.

THE SCALE OF THE SHOW

The numbers tell part of the story. With more than 600 exhibitors filling both the renovated North and West halls of the Las Vegas Convention Center, NADA 2026 represented the industry's largest gathering of decision-makers, innovators, and dealership leaders. The attendee profile revealed the quality of conversations happening on the floor:

- **29% Managers** – The operational leaders implementing new systems daily
- **28% Dealers** – The principals making strategic decisions about technology investments
- **17% Allied Industry** – Solution providers bringing innovation to market
- **12% International** – Global perspectives on automotive retail transformation

- **5% OEM Representatives** – Manufacturers aligning with dealer needs

These weren't casual observers. According to post-show surveys, attendees spent an average of 280-335 minutes on the expo floor, depending on their role. More telling: 28% were actively browsing for solutions, 15% made purchases during the show, and 19% planned to purchase within three months. The average exhibitor captured 50 qualified leads, with the show generating over 25,227 total scanned leads across all booths.

AI: FROM BUZZWORD TO BASELINE

Perhaps the most striking shift from previous NADA shows was the maturity of AI discussions. Gone were the speculative demonstrations and futuristic promises. In their place: practical, ROI-focused conversations about systems already delivering results.

Cox Automotive anchored the convention with the largest exhibitor footprint—a 21,600 square-foot "Cox Automotive Village" staffed by more than 500 experts and featuring 148 hands-on demonstration stations. But size alone doesn't tell the story. What Cox brought to Vegas was the industry's most comprehensive data foundation: 5.1 trillion vehicle insights and 2.9 trillion consumer data points across 13 brands, supported by 2,200 engineers, nearly 30 PhDs, and more than 75 data scientists and machine learning experts.

"We're not talking about hypothetical or future promises," explained Marianne Johnson, Cox Automotive's Chief Product Officer. "Cox Automotive's proven solutions are delivering results today across every aspect of the auto industry: retail, service, wholesale, logistics and fleet operations."

Cox wasn't alone. More than 40 AI-focused exhibitors presented at the 2026 NADA Show, each promising—and in many cases demonstrating—practical dealership applications that deliver measurable returns on investment.

THE CONVERSATION SHIFT: FROM "WHAT CAN AI DO?" TO "WHAT DOES AI COST PER UNIT?"

One of the quieter but more important themes at NADA 2026 was the growing recognition that technology alone isn't the answer. The industry conversation is shifting from "What can AI do?" to "What does AI cost per unit of impact?"

This pragmatic turn reflects a maturing market. Dealers are no longer impressed by flashy demonstrations. They're asking pointed questions about integration, workflow compatibility, and near-term ROI. The winners at NADA 2026 weren't necessarily the vendors with the most advanced AI—they were the ones who could clearly articulate how their solutions fit into existing dealership operations without adding complexity.

CDK Global exemplified this approach, showcasing innovations like their new Customer Data Platform (CDP) that brings all dealership data into "one clean, connected and actionable view." The focus wasn't on technological sophistication but on solving the real problem: fragmented data preventing dealers from understanding and serving their customers effectively.

FIXED OPS TAKES CENTER STAGE

While AI dominated the technology conversations, another theme emerged with equal force: the critical importance of fixed operations. According to the Presidio Group's Year-End 2025 Dealer Direction Survey, 85% of dealers expect parts and service to be the biggest driver of their business in 2026.

The shift makes strategic sense. With new and used vehicle margins under pressure, the service lane has become the dealership's most controllable profit center. The 2026 NADA agenda included dozens of sessions focused on fixed ops fundamentals: service retention, reconditioning speed, technician productivity, and service lane throughput.

But fixed ops faces its own crisis: people. NADA estimates dealerships need to replace approximately 76,000 technicians per year to keep pace with retirements and new demand, but only about 39,000 graduate from U.S. technical schools annually—an annual shortfall of roughly 37,000 technicians. This isn't a problem technology alone can solve, but AI-powered diagnostic tools, workflow automation, and intelligent scheduling systems can help existing technicians work more efficiently.

THE LAS VEGAS ADVANTAGE

The decision to return to Las Vegas for 2026 proved prescient. After the challenges of NADA 2025 in New Orleans—where a historic blizzard disrupted travel and significantly reduced attendance—Las Vegas offered what the industry needed: accessibility, infrastructure, and energy.

The show kicked off with an unprecedented opening reception at the Grand Prix Plaza, the world's largest immersive Formula 1 attraction. The high-octane venue set the tone for a show focused on speed, precision, and performance—themes that resonated throughout the week.

The Las Vegas Convention Center itself underwent significant upgrades, with the North building now mirroring the sleek, modern aesthetic of the West building. Better lighting, improved traffic flow, and upgraded amenities created a cohesive environment that elevated the entire exhibitor and attendee experience.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT DRIVES RESULTS

NADA's investment in digital tools paid dividends for exhibitors. The show's mobile app saw 9,395 downloads, generating 60,636 showroom views (exhibitor profile views) and 21,748 exhibitor bookmarks. This pre-show engagement translated directly into qualified booth traffic.

The MyPlanner feature allowed attendees to research and favorite exhibitors before arriving in Las Vegas, creating more intentional, productive conversations on the floor. One exhibitor noted: "Instead of random foot traffic, we were meeting with people who had already identified us as relevant to their needs. The conversation quality was completely different."

Social media amplification extended the show's reach far beyond Las Vegas. NADA generated 4,398,324 impressions across social platforms leading up to the show, with 331 native posts resulting in more than a million impressions. The show's livestream attracted 12,000 viewers, while NADA Show content generated 3,652 media mentions.

THE THREE TIERS OF AI ADOPTION

Conversations on the show floor revealed three distinct tiers of AI adoption emerging among dealerships:

Tier 1: The Experimenters – Dealers testing individual AI tools in isolated departments. They're seeing results but struggling with integration and workflow continuity.

Tier 2: The Integrators – Dealers building connected AI workflows across departments, from lead capture through F&I. They're experiencing measurable efficiency gains and better customer experiences.

Tier 3: The Re-platformers – Large dealer groups treating AI as their new operating system, standardizing workflows across rooftops with AI-driven decision-making at every step. These organizations are pulling ahead on efficiency, consistency, and profitability.

The gap between Tier 1 and Tier 3 isn't just technological—it's strategic. As one industry observer noted: "2026 won't be won by dealerships that 'try AI.' It will be won by dealerships that re-platform how the store runs, from lead-to-sale to inventory-to-listing, desking-to-F&I, and service retention, so that execution becomes consistent, measurable, and scalable."

THE HUMAN ELEMENT REMAINS CENTRAL

Despite all the AI focus, a consistent theme emerged: technology enhances human expertise rather than replacing it. Cox Automotive's tagline—"AI-Powered, People-Driven"—captured this balance perfectly.

The most effective AI implementations at NADA weren't the ones that eliminated human touchpoints. They were the ones that freed dealership staff from repetitive tasks so they could focus on high-value customer interactions. AI answering routine questions via chat. AI qualifying

leads automatically. AI optimizing inventory pricing. All of this created time for salespeople, service advisors, and F&I managers to do what they do best: build relationships and solve complex customer problems.

TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

Another emerging theme was the role of transparency in building customer confidence. In an era of heightened consumer skepticism about dealership practices, AI-powered tools that provide instant, data-backed valuations and clear pricing structures are becoming competitive differentiators.

Customers increasingly expect the kind of transparency they get from online retailers. Dealerships using AI to provide instant trade-in values, real-time financing options, and clear vehicle histories are winning trust—and conversions—at higher rates.

THE MARKET REALITY DRIVING URGENCY

The push toward AI adoption isn't happening in a vacuum. Cox Automotive points to a high-15-million-unit environment in 2026, indicating more slowdown than collapse. In a baseline market, operational edge becomes the growth strategy.

When you can't count on a rising tide to lift all boats, efficiency becomes everything. The dealers investing in AI, workflow optimization, and fixed ops excellence aren't preparing for some distant future—they're competing for market share today.

LOOKING AHEAD: CONSOLIDATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

The AI market in automotive retail is clearly heading toward consolidation and clearer value differentiation. With 40+ AI vendors exhibiting at NADA 2026, the market is oversaturated. Dealers face decision fatigue.

The next 12-18 months will likely see significant consolidation as vendors either prove their value through measurable results or exit the market. Dealers evaluating AI solutions should focus on three questions:

1. What measurable outcomes can this deliver in 90 days?
2. How does this integrate with our existing workflow?
3. What does this cost per unit of impact (per lead, per sale, per service appointment)?

Vendors who can't answer these questions clearly will struggle.

THE VERDICT

NADA Show 2026 marked an inflection point for automotive retail technology. AI moved from experimental to essential. The questions shifted from "Should we?" to "How quickly?" And the industry's leaders—both dealers and vendors—demonstrated that practical, results-driven AI is no longer theoretical.

For the 20,000+ attendees who spent those 280+ minutes walking the expo floor, the message was clear: the future of automotive retail is being built today, by dealers willing to embrace intelligent automation while keeping the human element central.

As one dealer principal summarized at the closing session: "Five years ago, we came to NADA to see what was coming. This year, we came to implement what works. That's the difference."

The 2027 NADA Show is already on the calendar. Based on the momentum from 2026, it promises to showcase not just more AI tools, but more proof points from dealers who transformed their operations—and their results—by treating AI not as a project, but as their new operating system.

Statistics and attendance data based on NADA Show 2026 Exhibitor Prospectus, RFID analysis, post-show surveys, and industry reports from Cox Automotive, CDK Global, and automotive media coverage.