mediahawk



Automotive trends report

Marketing trends 2026

AUTUMN / WINTER EDITION

Foreword



“The overall picture for this reporting period is of a market showing steady demand. Calls and website visitors are both up by 6% on last year, and the plate-change months still create peaks.

But behind the headline numbers, a more complex picture is emerging. The way buyers find and contact dealerships is changing; AI search tools are answering many of their early questions without the need to click, making it more difficult for marketers to influence them. And by the time they contact a dealership, they’re much closer to making a buying decision.

Meanwhile, Google Business Profile continues to drive around half of calls. And PPC is becoming a stronger source of calls, though only where dealers have improved their targeting to bring in high-intent leads.

The marketers we speak to say enquiries are flat or slightly up, with used car sales outperforming new. Some dealership groups are adjusting their spend strategy to gain a foothold for new brands entering the UK, and manufacturers’ finance offers are helping boost sales.

With flat budgets and greater scrutiny of spend, it’s more important than ever for marketers to know which channels generate calls and sales, so they can avoid wasted spend and deliver measurable ROI.
This report explores what our latest data tells us about the state of the UK automotive market, and looks beyond the numbers to share practical tips for marketing success in the new, AI-driven world.”

Harry Bott, Director, Mediahawk

All data from Mediahawk’s marketing analytics software has been anonymised.
Data reporting period from September 2025 to September 2026. Year-on-year comparisons are for September 2025 vs. September 2026.

Conversion quality matters more

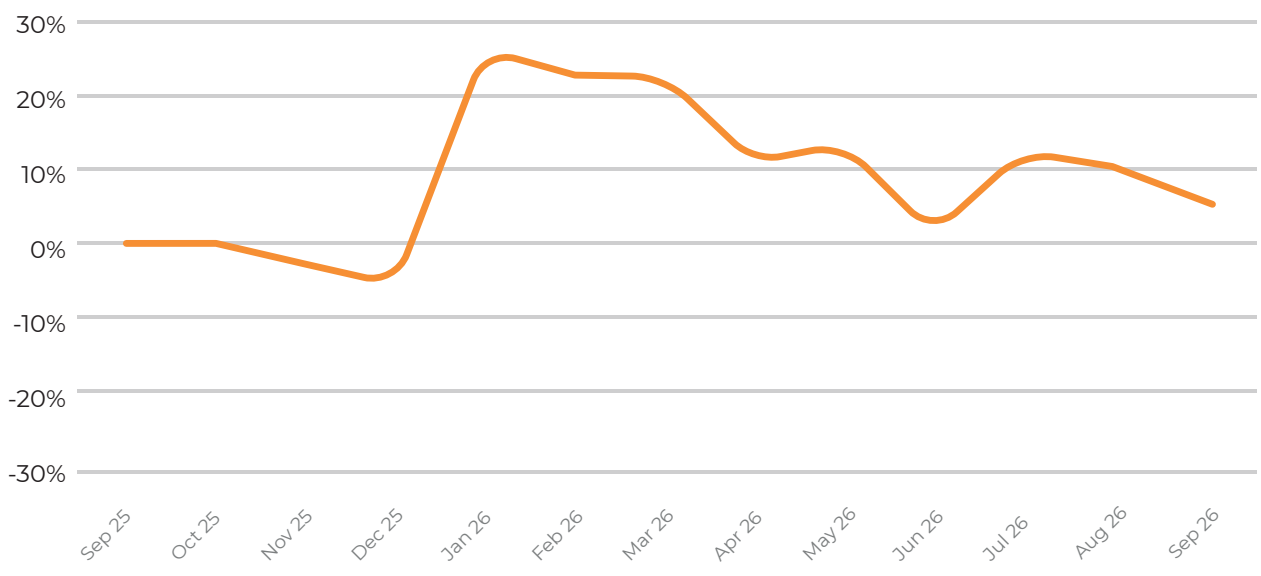
Mediahawk's data shows that website visitors per dealer were 6% higher year-on-year, and visitor volumes followed a similar seasonal pattern to last year. January saw a 24% jump, and visitor levels remained high until after the March plate change. Dealerships also saw a smaller, but still significant, uptick in visitor volume in July.

The growth in January and July illustrates the changing nature of buyer journeys, with the path from research to purchase getting longer and more complex.

Although most of those visitors didn't immediately convert, they didn't disappear. It's likely that many were in the early stages of planning purchases for plate change months.

With visitor levels steady or showing marginal growth, dealership marketers tell us they're more interested in the quality of conversions rather than traffic volumes. By pinpointing genuine buying signals within the noise of visitors in the research stage, marketers can identify where their spend is delivering high-intent leads and report more accurately on the ROI of their efforts.

Index: Website visitors per dealer



Note: Total website visitors include all calls originating from dealership websites – whether the call occurs during a website visit or afterwards.

Quick tip: Don't let early-year research traffic go to waste

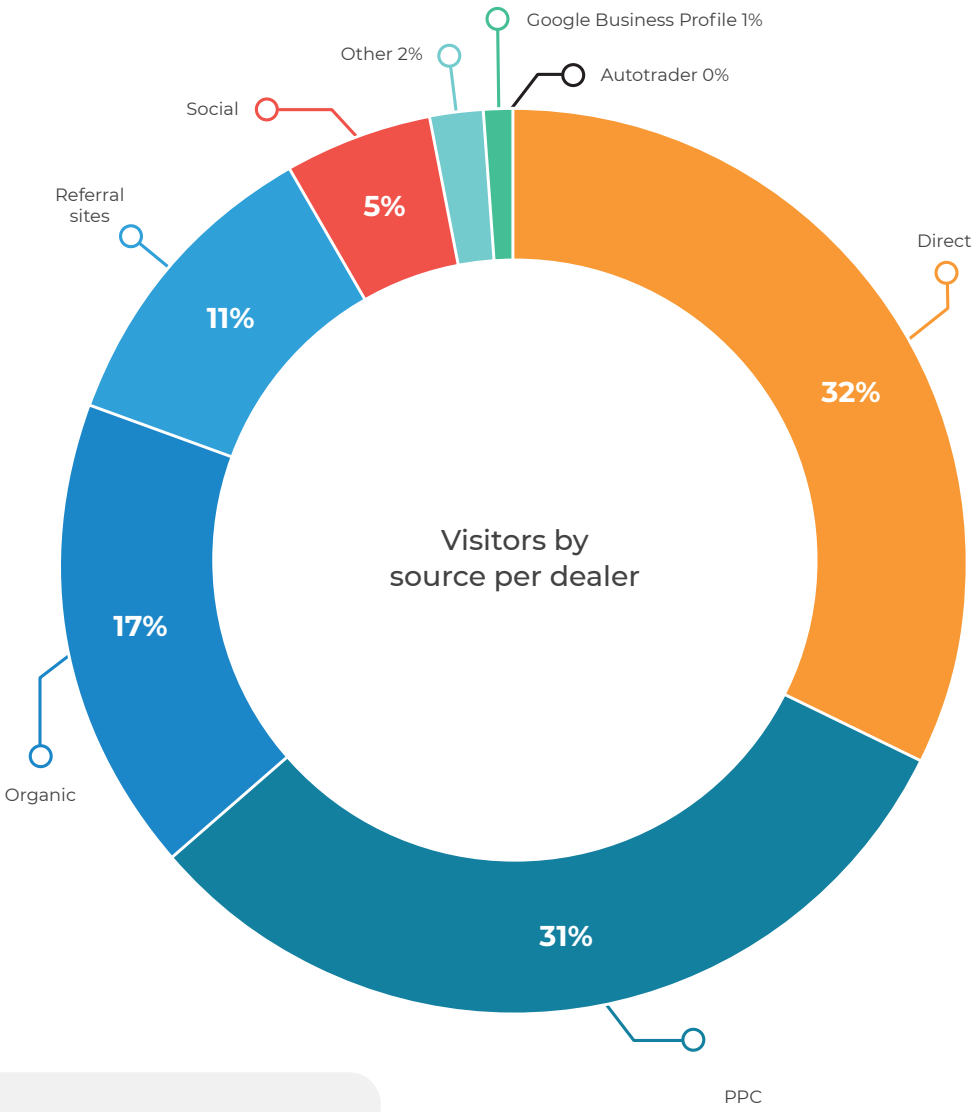
Build audiences from visitors who browsed your site but didn't call with Mediahawk's **Google integration**. Then engage them through remarketing as the March plate change approaches, so your spend targets buyers who already know you.

AI search is impacting channel share

Direct (32%) and PPC (31%) now bring in nearly two-thirds of visitors. Google Business Profile, Autotrader, and social have all lost share, and organic's share is down by 19%.

Dealerships tell us they're using paid search to help them stay visible in crowded search engine results pages (SERP), where AI overviews and other SERP features are pushing organic results down. This explains why PPC's share increased from 24% last year to 31% in our latest reporting period.

Direct's share remained steady, but direct visitor numbers grew throughout the year, demonstrating the increasing influence of AI overviews and AI assistants on buyer journeys. AI search tools often send visitors without a trackable source, so they end up being attributed to direct or organic search.



Our take: Learn how to compete in AI search

"The rising number of direct visitors is what we'd expect to see with more buyers using AI overviews and AI assistants; they answer early questions, so fewer people click through from search. Marketers now have another challenge to contend with – keeping their dealerships competitive in AI search tools. To do that, you need to understand the true source of every call, enquiry, and conversion, so you know what's boosting your visibility. With tools like **User Journey**, you can see all the sources of repeat visits, which pages visitors were on, and what they downloaded. That gives you much deeper insight into buyers' paths to purchase, even if they begin with AI search."



Faye Thomassen,
Head of Marketing, Mediahawk

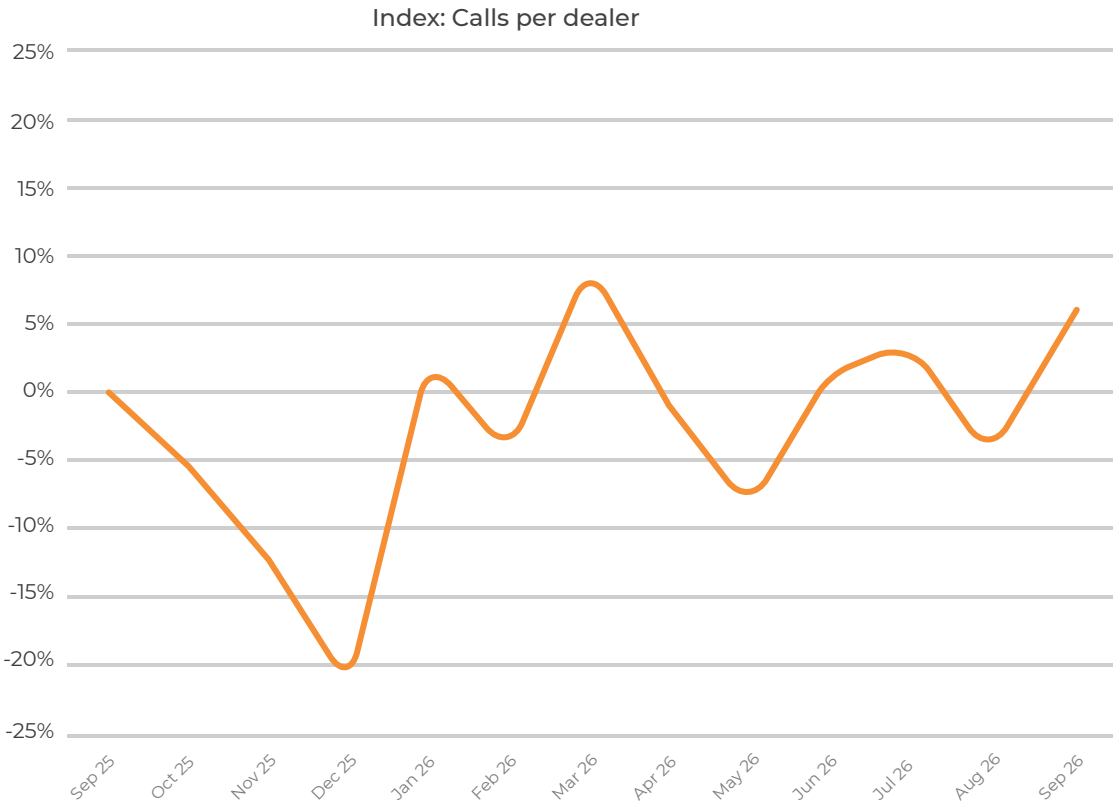
Quick tip: Create content for AI discoverability

Optimise your online presence so you appear in AI overviews and AI assistants. Create content that these tools can easily find and quote, such as FAQs, buying guides, and accurate stock details.

Modest call growth – but how many callers convert?

Despite the AI-powered shift in buyers' research journeys, calls remain critical for generating enquiries and conversions. This can be seen in the clear peaks in call volumes during the March and September plate-change months.

Calls per dealer were 6% higher year-on-year, but only five of the 12 months produced increases on the September 2025 call volume. In a flat market, it can be tempting to focus on generating more calls, but that's not necessarily the path to revenue growth. Many dealerships already struggle to answer and handle every call, so it's important to have staff in place to cope with anticipated peaks and to coach them on what turns calls into sales.



Note: Total calls encompass all calls to dealerships, whether they're from a dealership's website, referral site, directory, event, or social media.

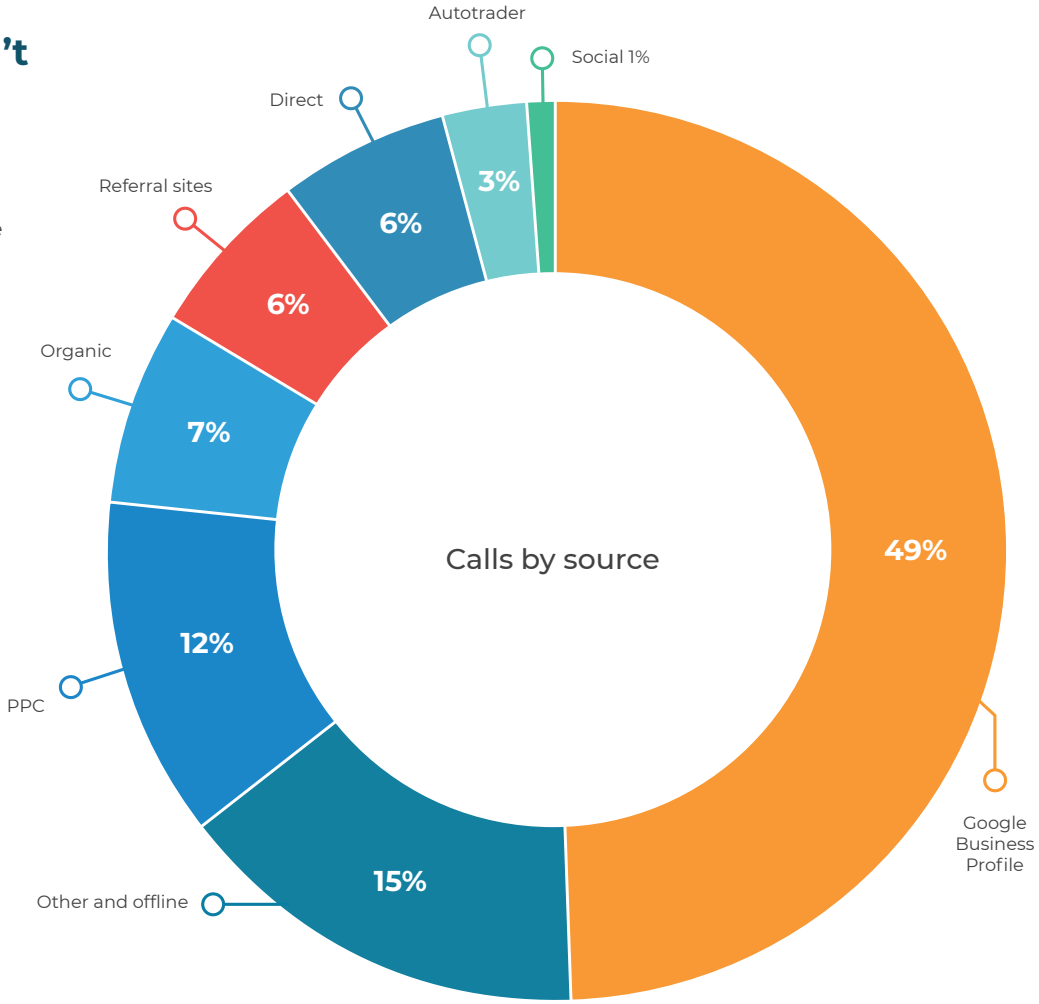
Quick tip: Monitor call performance, not just volume

Find out how many calls you're missing, and when, so you can optimise resourcing and training to handle more calls. Use **Speech Analytics** to see which calls led to test drives and sales, so you can coach teams on what converts. Then use **Sales Matching** to connect calls and visits to sales and focus your budget on the channels, campaigns, and keywords that bring in people who are ready to buy.

Static numbers don't tell the whole story

Although its share fell from 56% last year to 49%, Google Business Profile is still by far the biggest source of calls.

PPC (+25%) and organic search (+29%) showed strong growth as sources of callers, with PPC's call volume growing since May, when marketers began increasing their spend. At 3%, Autotrader remains a small source of calls, but it's still a vital way to get in front of high-intent buyers.



Quick tip: See the whole buying journey

Keep static tracking numbers on Google Business Profile, Autotrader, and offline ads, and use dynamic numbers on your website. Then you can link every call back to its exact source, campaign, keyword, and page. Mediahawk's **Parameter Connect** brings together data from static and dynamic numbers, giving you a unified view of campaign and channel performance. And map every touchpoint before each call with **User Journey** for insights such as whether an Autotrader buyer called straight from the listing or after visiting your site, so you know where to increase spend and where to cut it.

Our take: Time to get smart about call tracking

"Google Business Profile grabs the headlines, but about a third of calls still come through the website. A static tracking number on Google Business Profile only credits the number dialled, so you don't know which campaign, keyword, or page did the groundwork to create the call. But with dynamic numbers on your website, you can link every call back to the channel, campaign, keyword, and the page it came from, and allocate spend where it really makes a difference."

Faye Thomassen,
Head of Marketing, Mediahawk



Summary

Turn market insight into marketing action

Our analysis of the latest data and trends highlights four important actions that we recommend automotive marketers take as we head into 2027.



1. **Convert more calls.** Calls are up 6%, but only five of the 12 months beat last September. With steady demand, growth means converting more callers. So, it's essential to gain visibility of where and when calls go unanswered and which calls turn into sales. Track missed calls by dealership and hour, and staff up for the seasonal peaks. Use Speech Analytics to understand which calls lead to test drives and sales, then coach your teams to do what works. And use Sales Matching to connect calls and visits to sales, so you can move your spend to the channels that bring you high-intent callers – and get a demonstrable return on your marketing investments.

2. **Turn browsers into buyers.** More website traffic doesn't automatically mean more calls. Visitor numbers rose dramatically early in the year, but website calls didn't grow to match. Buyer journeys are becoming longer, so it's important not to write off research traffic. Judge your website's performance by the enquiries it creates, not how many visits it gets. And use Mediahawk's Google integration to target people who browsed but didn't call with remarketing in the run-up to plate changes.

3. **Understand the sources and outcomes of your calls.** Around a third of calls come through dealers' websites, but static numbers can't show what drove them. So, it's important to combine static numbers on Google Business Profile, Autotrader, and offline ads with dynamic tracking numbers on your website that show you the true source of every call. Use Parameter Connect, User Journey, and Sales Matching to gain a clear view of website conversion quality, see the full buyer journey, and identify which channels, campaigns, keywords, and pages generate the right leads for your dealerships.

> **"Dealers can see the demand is there, but buyers are researching differently and for longer, often with AI, so they're arriving much readier to buy. The marketers who drive business growth will be the ones who know exactly which channels generate calls that lead to sales, and invest there."**



Harry Bott,
Director, Mediahawk

4. **Up your AI search game.** With the growing use of AI search tools, organic visitors are down and direct visitors are up, and some dealers say buyers arrive later in the journey and readier to buy. Now that buyers can research without visiting your website, you need to optimise your online presence to be visible to AI overviews and AI assistants. Make it easy for AI search tools to find and quote your content – and make sure your sales process can respond quickly to people who arrive at your dealership ready to buy.

About Mediahawk

Mediahawk combines technologies like marketing attribution, call tracking, and speech analytics to help marketers achieve their most ambitious goals and overcome their biggest challenges.

We're dedicated to supporting automotive marketers as they demonstrate the impact of their strategies and optimise their plans to deliver meaningful ROI.

Our platform, experts, and **Client Excellence Programme** are trusted by more than 4,000 marketers in organisations of all sizes and sectors.



Let's solve your challenges together

We'd love to hear about your goals for 2027 and beyond – and explore how we can help you achieve them. Get in touch today to start the conversation.

01908 448 234

mediahawk.co.uk/automotive

mediahawk