

CAR DEALER

Implementing Best Practices: Eric Chase's Legal Audit Checklist for Auto Dealers®

This checklist is a suggested guide for all automotive dealers (1) to use in their ongoing efforts to assure their files and operations are current in matters of legal importance; (2) to provide reminders for ongoing and periodic legal requirements; (3) to have a simple, handy way of auditing their legal "health;" and (4) to trigger action(s) that might otherwise be overlooked. The checklist does not constitute legal advice.

Annual/Quarterly Internal Legal Audit

Done by: _____

Date: _____

STATUS*
OK Follow up N/A

I. Franchise Relationship Files

- | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| A. Current Sales and Service Agreement, with all amendments and modifications | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| i. Should be up-to-date in every dealership | | | |
| ii. Keep in a nearby, easy-to-access file drawer | | | |
| iii. Alternate Dispute Resolution (ADR) provisions, if any. Be sure to read and know when you have alternatives to the courtroom. (Note: Federal Law prohibits auto franchisors from imposing mandatory binding arbitration for all disputes as part of a dealer agreement.) | | | |
| B. Factory Bulletins, Announcements | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| i. Watch for "zingers" in otherwise routine correspondence (sometimes references to these show up in termination notices) | | | |
| ii. Carefully review any communications that refers to any change(s) in the brand's dealer agreement. | | | |
| C. Possible or Actual Disputes or Disagreements: correspondence, memos, notes and other documents regarding actual or potential controversy, or other communications addressing items that are specifically applicable to your dealership. (Keep copies of all correspondence that's addressed directly to you on all these subjects.) | | | |
| i. Sales | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| ii. Service and CSI | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| iii. Allocations | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| iv. Warranty | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| v. Dealership Audits | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| vi. Facilities | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| vii. Location of Dealership | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| viii. Dualling/Undualling | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

* OK (i.e., no action required)
Follow-Up (should specify *what* you need to do and *when*)
N/A (not applicable to dealer at this time)

- ix. New agreements/amendments
- x. Availability of (desirable) product
- xi. Incentive Programs and Compliance with Terms/Conditions
- xii. Floorplan

D. Franchise Termination File, if applicable. Threats regarding possible termination/nonrenewal. On this one, if you are getting threatening or coercive comments – keep a separate file, and *responsibly respond to all such mail* from your franchisor. On this one, if a termination threat is even hinted, talk to an experienced lawyer.

E. “Required” Business Plans

- i. Some, but by no means all, brands require periodic (usually annual) business plans.
- ii. Be careful on these. If you puff your plans, the factory may argue that you made compromises. If your franchisor has already pre-printed your plans or “promises,” don’t sign on to those that are not fair or realistic. Watch for “zingers” that might set you up for termination.

F. Financial Statements and Related Documents

- i. Monthly financial statements: keep at least a full set of monthly financial statements as reported to the franchisor for *three years*.
- ii. Keep end-of-year cumulative factory statements for *seven years*.
- iii. Keep copies of all state, federal and local tax filings, and associated correspondence for *seven years*.
- iv. Other financial statements, audits, reviews.
- v. Related financial correspondence.
- vi. Procedures to protect confidentiality of and limited access to all financial documents

G. Document Retention for Litigation: If you are in litigation, or a formal dispute is imminent, you *must* retain and safeguard everything that may be relevant, including all electronically stored information. Coordinate with your counsel on this.

II. Legal Advisor/State Legal Issues

A. Your Legal Advisor

- i. Every dealer should have one: an attorney you can talk to with confidence.
- ii. Make sure your lawyer has experience in franchise/auto.
- iii. Don’t be shy. If you’re looking for a lawyer, interview more than one.

B. State Legal Questions

- i. Keep mailouts from your association that address legal topics.
- ii. Call your association with questions.
- iii. Keep a copy of state franchise laws and regulations that affect dealers: *Read them!*

III. Business Structure Records; Minutes

- A. Structure: Corp.; LLC, etc.**
- B. Basic Documents: Articles of Incorporation; S-election; LLC.**
- C. Minutes**
- D. Licenses**

IV. Real Estate

- A. Ownership**
- B. Lease**
- C. Acquisition Documents (e.g., buy-sell)**

D. Other Realty Records: Taxes; environmental issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
V. Financial Records/Business Insurance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A. Monthly Statements, submitted to factory, and all accounting tax files.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B. Tax related files	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. What kind of an entity is your dealership and why? LLC? C-Corp? S-Corp?			
ii. LIFO			
iii. Assurance of timely sales tax payments			
iv. Withholding for employees			
C. File Destruction Policy: Make it clear, and in writing. Assure consistency with legal retention requirements. <i>Keep</i> everything related to ongoing or imminent litigation. Insure all employees instructed not to delete electronic information related to dispute. Do it <i>in writing</i> .	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
D. Insurance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Periodic audit/update with agent			
ii. Coverage adequacy			
(1) Check coverage for consumer disputes defense, and liability coverage			
(2) Business interruption			
VI. Loan Documents/Bank Relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Mortgages, credit lines, cap loans, but, especially, floor plan(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ii. Bank account files and statements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iii. Bank/Lender correspondence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
VII. Consumer Relations/Sales Practices			
A. Complaints from your customers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Written procedures to follow	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ii. Follow-up	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B. Litigation/Arbitration Records	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C. Required Recordkeeping/Customer Privacy/Identity Theft/Loan Actions and Notices (Excellent publications available from NADA)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Security measures/limiting access	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ii. Safeguarding Customer Information/Deal Jackets: Written policy and employee confidentiality agreements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iii. Consideration in referrals of credit applications of the requirements of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA) and the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA): ~ Does dealership policy/practice avoid necessity of sending adverse action notices?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iv. Staff Employee Trained in Privacy/Safeguard Rules - Keep training records	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
D. Assignment of Responsible Employee to (a) Stay current on legal/regulatory requirements; (b) Monitor Consumer Relations at the Dealership, (c) and respond to inquiries/complaints	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
E. Clear and Consistent F&I Practices and Policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
F. Consistency and Legality of RO Itemization (Do you have a documentary fee issue?)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
G. Arbitration Clause in all Consumer Contracts (Language for possible clause available from author without charge)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Must be fair and mutual	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ii. Should bar multiple claimants and class claims	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
iii. Should be reviewed in the light of State laws and case decisions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
VIII. Promotions/Advertising			
A. Know and Monitor State Laws and Regulations on advertising.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- B. Have a “Duty Expert” to Assure Compliance in All Print and Broadcast Advertising.
- C. If you use an agency, *assurance* of compliance is a must, because you may be liable for *their* mistakes.
- D. Compliance with Do-Not-Call Rules and Faxing Regulations
- IX. Work Force/Employment**
- A. Posting of All Required State and Federal Notices.
 - i. Equal Opportunity (EEOC)
 - ii. Wages
 - iii. Family Leave (FMLA)
- B. Compliance: ADA, FMLA, COBRA, Immigration Law
- C. Plans/Policies/Correspondence regarding benefits:
 - i. e.g., health, dental, 401(k), profit sharing, vacation, etc.
- D. Individual Personnel Folders (Ensure Privacy!)
- E. Dealership Employee Policy Manual, including clear policies on sexual harassment and discrimination. Be sure to make clear that manual is not a contract, and does not change at-will employment status.
- F. Confidentiality Agreements: Especially as to consumer information in deal jackets.
- G. Training Programs
 - i. In-house: Periodically (not less than once a year and as part of initial indoctrination with *all* new employees) provide guidance on: sales practices, discrimination, sexual harassment, integrity. ~ Keep files on all training.
 - ii. Factory: Tech Training
- H. Unionization Issues: Policies to properly deal with unionization efforts; bargaining in good faith when there is a union.
- X. Succession**
- A. Estate Planning
 - i. Do you have a will that reflects your current situation and what you want?
- B. Successor Addendum to Sales and Service Agreement
 - i. If you haven't done this, you should do it now!
- XI. Co-Ownership Issues (if applicable)**
- A. Shareholder (or Member) Agreement(s)
- B. Employment Agreements
- C. Buyout and Valuation Provisions
- D. Insurance to Protect Against Financial Consequences of Owner of death/disability.
- XII. Environmental**
- A. State Requirements
- B. Federal Requirements (EPA)
- C. Any ongoing issues: e.g., underground storage tanks, spills, Hazardous waste disposal
- D. Periodic Environmental Audit
- XIII. Safety/Emergency Procedures**
- A. Compliance with All Applicable Statutes, Regulations and Ordinances
- B. Posted Procedures for Employees
- C. Emergency Call List
- D. Fire Drill/Alarm and Sprinkler Inspection
- E. Special Circumstances (E.g., Hurricane or Earthquake Vulnerability)
- XIV. Miscellaneous Legal Matters (This would include all other miscellaneous law-related items not covered by I-XIII, such as, for example, contracts or disputes with vendors or outside service suppliers, spousal issues in divorce of principal, etc.)**