September 2026 U.S. Auto Sales Forecast & Automotive Industry Outlook

U.S. Automotive Market Forecast for Dealers

HOUSTON, TX, UNITED STATES, October 2, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Fountain Forward projects the upcoming economic release for U.S. Light Vehicle Sales will be a 16.4 million seasonally adjusted annual rate (SAAR) for September 2026.

This automotive market forecast reflects a market that came out of the summer with more gas in the tank than most people expected. August was the sixth straight month above a 16 million pace, and September gets a little help from the calendar this year, with Labor Day weekend landing in September's numbers instead of August's.

Labor Day weekend helps dealers move 80,000 to 100,000 units and its placement in August or September sometimes moves SAAR around even though SAAR features an adjustment for it.

Automotive Industry Outlook

Fountain Forward's automotive industry outlook for September 2026 points to a market heading into the fourth quarter with leaner lots. Dealers are selling faster than they can restock. Industry days' supply dropped to 73 in August, the lowest level since spring 2025, and inventory is tightest at the affordable end of the market at 54 days, right where payment-sensitive shoppers need it most.

Affordability is still the thing that could slow this market down. The average new-vehicle payment hit a record $812 for August. The model-year changeover is also running well behind last year's pace, which could shift the timing of incentives and closeout pricing as the year winds down. Dealers should keep a close eye on manufacturer programs, inventory availability, and how shoppers respond over the next few weeks.

By analyzing proprietary sales performance, high-frequency economic indicators, dealer benchmarks, and proprietary behavioral signals, Fountain Forward delivers an automotive market forecast designed to help dealers anticipate near-term demand, optimize marketing investments, and align inventory strategy in a shifting economic environment.

Auto Industry Insights for Dealers

"A hidden signal in August's sales crossed our screens when we noticed that unit sales were strong without the push and pull from the clearance markdowns and dealer incentives that start to show up in a typical August. We are still on that signal in September. We like the underlying trend of consumer spend here and these inventory constraints are cropping up because the American consumer has just surprised everyone in automotive." said Stephen Jurgella, CEO of Fountain Forward

Key Dealer Takeaways for September

Inventory Strategy
Supply looks very different depending on the badge out front. Toyota, Lexus, and Honda stores are running lean, while Stellantis, Buick, and Lincoln are still carrying heavy inventory. If you are tight, protect gross on the affordable units that are hardest to replace. If you are heavy, work your aged units now, before more model-year 2027 inventory shows up. 2027 model year vehicles are running late with MY27 comprising 12% of inventory in September vs 24%+ in recent years.

Marketing Strategy
The new models have not hit lots yet but they are coming. So '27 incentives and '26 clearance markdowns should drive volumes in October. Payment-focused messaging, and trade-in value are still what get shoppers' attention. And put your hybrids front and center, because buyers across nearly every brand are asking for them.

F&I Focus
With payments at record highs, expect more negative equity, longer loan terms, and tougher approvals. Showing clear, honest payment options early keeps deals from falling apart at the end.

Sales Execution
Shoppers are out there, but they're taking their time and comparing more stores before they commit. Quick responses, steady follow-up, and tight lead handling will make the difference heading into Q4.

The Automotive Accelerator

Fountain Forward's unique advantage is its Automotive Accelerator. Through the Automotive Accelerator, the company helps auto dealers generate more qualified leads, identify bottlenecks limiting sales, and deploy marketing investments where they are most likely to drive vehicle

sales.

Rather than relying on isolated advertising metrics, Fountain Forward uses a full-funnel approach designed to help dealers sell more vehicles with greater consistency, stronger accountability, and clearer visibility into what is driving performance in today's automotive market.

Fountain Forward's forecasting framework integrates proprietary consumer behavioral indicators, sentiment measures, and leading economic variables to translate complex market data into clear, actionable insights for dealerships operating in competitive local markets.

Prior Forecast

Fountain Forward's August forecast projected 16.4 million SAAR for August 2026, compared to an actual reported result of 16.764 million.

Fountain Forward runs its forecasting framework with proprietary street-level behavioral data, dealership performance indicators, and evolving macroeconomic conditions to improve directional accuracy and market responsiveness.

If you want to hold us accountable to the actual number, Fountain Forward projects the upcoming economic release for U.S. Light Vehicle Sales will be a 16.4 million seasonally adjusted annual rate (SAAR) for September 2026.

About Fountain Forward

Fountain Forward is an automotive marketing and analytics agency specializing in vehicle sales forecasting, automotive market analysis, and dealership performance insights. By combining national automotive trends with dealership-level and high-frequency data, Fountain Forward delivers trusted automotive industry outlooks that help dealers plan for sustainable growth.

For deeper insight into current market trends and dealership implications, watch the Automotive Market Minute, Fountain Forward's monthly video series breaking down the latest automotive sales trends and industry data.

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