



Small store means closer connection to staff

▲ Jackson Hayes

VEGREVILLE, ALTA. – It is safe to assume that a dealership with 21 CSI awards from its factory knows a thing or two about making customers happy.

Such is the case for Brian Baron and Vegreville Ford in tiny Vegreville, Alta. roughly 100 km east of Edmonton.

Under current ownership for the last 25 years, the store has won 21 Ford President's Awards with what its owner terms as a culture of care that starts at the top.

"Everybody knows how I think and all the managers are on the same page," Baron says. "Our expectations are communicated throughout the store and they are discussed daily. With an engaged staff that likes to be there, you can see it in their work. Our salespeople are on the front lines and they make great first impressions. They are the kind of people who have a genuine interest in taking care of the customer and getting them what they want."

Also key for Baron and his managers is communication. He says management has sit-downs with technicians once a week to deal with housekeeping and review something that went wrong or right.

Car sales are also examined to hone techniques and avoid errors.

And addressing problems immediately is paramount to running a smooth operation. If somebody is failing or having difficulties, it is addressed, not ignored.

Baron offered one example of a tech several months ago whose performance had started dropping off. It was explored further with the staffer eventually revealing he had recently been diagnosed with cancer.

"It's pretty tight here," he said, noting the tech is expected to make a full recovery.

When asked how he ensures a happy employee base, Baron said it is paramount to hire right in the first place.

He concedes he has had to learn the hard way on occasion, but after 25 years he's gotten pretty good at "judging horse flesh," as he puts it.

"Your gut tells you a lot. And remember, past performance is a pretty good indication of future performance. We also try to pay as well as we can. But more importantly, you have to treat your staff well. If you ask my wife, she'd tell you everyone gets to do whatever they want, whenever they want," he said with a chuckle.

We all hear the studies suggesting a bal-



Vegreville Ford by the numbers

STAFF: **35**

BUILDING SIZE: **21,000 SQ. FT.**

TOTAL NEW SOLD IN 2015: **300**

TOTAL USED SOLD IN 2015: **200**

anced life between home and work is an important element to production. Baron believes all stores should accommodate both sides as much as possible as a happy employee is a more productive one.

Keeping staff at Ford happy includes maintaining an open door communication policy, treating everyone with respect and fostering an "emotionally mature operation" with as little drama as possible.

All things, from Baron's view, that are made easier by the size of the store. The store has 35 staff in a town of less than 6,000.

"I look at some people who run big stores or multiple dealerships and say I don't know how you do it. I want to know what's going on in every corner and I want to know if an employee is having problems or getting married... if you have a guy that's not focused, you have to know why and get them happy." **FAW**

Viking mascot sets Jim Hansen Gateway Ford Lincoln apart

▲ April Chadwick

GRAND PRAIRIE, ALTA. – Jim Hansen Gateway Ford Lincoln was founded in 1984 by owner Kevin Hansen's father Jim as a Lincoln-Mercury franchise.

At the time, Grand Prairie already had an established Ford store. The disappearance of the Mercury brand from the Canadian market in 1999 meant re-establishing the dealership as a Ford-Lincoln store.

Grand Prairie is a regional hub for northwestern Alberta with a combined population of 250,000. As the commercial centre for the northern Peace River area, the city draws sales from within the province and northern British Columbia.

According to Chris Wall, general manager, "as the biggest retail centre north of Edmonton, competition in the marketplace is intense with two GM, two Dodge, two Ford and a host of import dealerships vying for business."

Sales reflect the rugged environment with light-duty trucks and SUVs comprising 90 percent of business.

"The dealership is retail-centric," says Wall "and not as dependent on fleet sales as some of our competitors. Nevertheless, the downturn in the oil and gas industry has hurt the region and sales are down from 2015."

"Over the last two decades, Alberta has had a very competitive employee environment," explains owner Kevin Hansen. "As a dealership, we have focused on keeping the best people in the industry."

The early implementation of an HR department, flexible shifts and encouraging work-life balance has been part of a long-term strategy of employee satisfaction. It is not uncommon to have staff in the five to 10-year range.

"People are the way we really differentiate ourself in this business. A customer can buy a vehicle anywhere. It's the staff's relationship with the customer that counts."

Long a family environment, the dealership has still benefited from participation in Ford's global Customer Experi-



ence Movement.

Not well known to the general public, the automaker launched the program in 2010 to change dealership culture. The voluntary program uses staff surveys and coaching to foster frontline employee engagement.

As Hansen explains it: "Happy employees equals happy customers and that creates long-term loyalty and higher profits."

To better capitalize on the program, the dealership created the role of customer experience manager. Mike Harris, who had previously looked after Internet sales, is a champion of the CEM program.

Harris says feedback showed staff primarily wanted recognition and training.

"We implemented the bright spot program, a peer-to-peer initiative that allows staff to recognize teamwork and has produced over 400 nominations. Each person nominated is obliged to pass it on to another employee. Awards are given in each department at a monthly luncheon."

Ongoing training is a priority for all staff members through coaching and performance labs.

Training has to start off on the right foot, Harris says. "New team members go through an onboarding process

that reinforces our family environment, how we do business, how we treat each other and our customers."

The idea of a Hansen family that permeates the work environment is given physical form in the shape of the dealership's mascot, Arnie the Viking. Arnie is a product of both the region and the family's Scandinavian heritage.

The dealership had a dozen professionally produced videos featuring Arnie's epic journey from being unfrozen from a block of bronze age ice to Hansen Ford where he is welcomed as part of the family and gently introduced into the world of customer service.

The humorous videos can be found on the dealership's website and YouTube. They have helped create a popular character that differentiates Hansen Ford in a crowded marketplace.

Arnie is so part of the Hansen family that he is in demand for public appearances across the region and is the public face of Hansen's many charitable initiatives that span a wide range of giving from women's shelters to film festivals.

"We have really moved the needle on employee satisfaction," says Hansen, "we plan to continue with CEM and our focus on engagement. I don't believe that our employees can be happy enough." **FAW**

Hansen Gateway Ford Lincoln by the numbers

STAFF: **95**

BUILDING SIZE: **35,000 SQ. FT.**

TOTAL NEW SOLD IN 2015: **973**

TOTAL USED SOLD IN 2015: **545**