

Loyalty keeps Ricart atop Ward's Dealer Business 500
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The man whose dealership again dominates the Ward's Dealer Business 500 credits his blue ribbon to increased "customer loyalty" rather than mere "customer satisfaction."

Ricart Ford's roster-topping gross revenues of a record \$366.1 million flowed from a three-pronged program started by the Columbus, Ohio, dealership in 1994, says vigorous 46-year-old Fred Ricart, co-owner with his brother Rhett.

Called "winning customers for life," the program highlights the following:

1. Consistently balanced new-unit inventory, so that any specifically contented model, be it truck or car, is in stock or available the next day. ("If that Eddie Bauer Expedition isn't here, that customer is gone; if it is, he's a 'customer for life,'" says Ricart.)
2. A strong used-vehicle department, moving vehicles briskly so that highest-possible trade-in allowances can be offered.
3. "Dealer image" in the Ohio capital's market "second to none." Ricart saturates his territory with self-generated ads starring such celebrities as Arnold Schwarzenegger and such ideas as "Ricart Junction" derived from the popular TV show "Petticoat Junction." The image-fostering flood of national-quality Ricart TV, radio and print ads, including footage of his NASCAR racing car, "helps tie the customer to the dealership as much as to his Ford car or truck, if not more so," says Ricart, who believes factory and ad agency guidance on marketing a dealer's image should be subordinate to the dealer's own instincts and ideas.

With a franchise-topping Chrysler-Plymouth-Jeep-Eagle dealership in Columbus plus five import brands on his main Ford outlet campus, Ricart has become such an institution in central Ohio that he has launched a Ricart customer buyer's club providing discounts at about 500 retail stores and service facilities.

As far as the growing number of publicly-owned superstores are concerned, Ricart finds them "10 years behind us in marketing concepts and management, but poised to catch up some day. By that time, with our emphasis on customer loyalty and management training, we'll be 10 years ahead of them."

Noting that dealer seller to public groups like Republic Industries are compelled to drop out of brand 20 groups, because of SEC financial disclosure restrictions, Ricart's chief operating officer, Greg Dryden, questions whether the umbrella of Republic's AutoNations USA can adequately replace the value of sharing operating data with 19

other same-make dealers from other markets.

"Ricart has thrived, with a lease renewal rate of 67 percent in 1996, because of Fred's dedication to serving and retaining customers," says Dryden. "It wouldn't be the same being part of a national network."