

Ward's Dealer Business
July 1999
By Maynard M. Gordon
Novel sales efforts usher in 2000

COPYRIGHT 1999 Intertec Publishing Corp., a PRIMEDIA company

Dealers across the country are stepping up to the arrival of the 2000-model year with sales techniques and aids that really are "all-new." As part of the millennium milestone, dealers want their sales staffs to be positioned for the future with the latest customer-friendly approaches and attitudes.

Reaction to the 2000 models already introduced or about to be "points to peak demand among consumers to be first to buy a 2000 model," says dealer Tom Carpenter of Saturn/Southeast in Columbus, OH. "That's going to be a great incentive right off the bat."

As a result, dealers awaiting early-arriving 2000 models, like Dodge and Plymouth retailers with the 2000 Neon, or Saturn stores with the new midsize LS sedan and LW wagon, are already uncorking special previews and marketing programs.

BMW's 2000 Z3, Chevrolet's 2000 Monte Carlo, Jaguar's 2000 S-model and Nissan's 2000 Maxima are among cars in the millennial parade getting special promotions from their automakers and dealers.

The tide is expected to inspire dealers in all markets to stage special events and ad campaigns timed for delivery of the first 2000-model cars and trucks.

"We played up the benefit of 2000-model power at our spring training and 2000 Neon launch event this spring in 30 cities," says Mick Sharrard, Daimler/Chrysler project leader for launch and event training.

He adds, "More than 25,000 dealership salespersons attended the programs, and we impressed on them the appeal of leveraging the first 2000 models against 1999 competition and as stage-setters for their other 2000s coming later on."

As the new millennium approaches, big and small dealers alike have been using a variety of novel sales initiatives for new vehicles.

Internet websites and leasing also are major new-age innovations.

An Internet site pioneer, the seven Burt dealerships based in Englewood, CO, have opened the first toll-free general auto information service. It's open 24 hours, seven days.

This has proven a major source of sales leads, says owner Lloyd Chavez.

Staffers who take the calls answer all sorts of questions on subjects ranging from automotive lore to competitive products.

Buick "flagship" dealerships, which are already open in six cities, include clock tower-like structures housing computer terminals. Those give shoppers access to a data and marketing computers at any hour.

Dedicated facilities for individual makes and models are a new trend, increasing sales of new vehicles.

The No. 1 dealer on the Ward's Dealer Business Top 500 for 1998 - Ricart Ford of Columbus, OH - opened separate buildings for Ford trucks at his Ford and import complex.

He did the same thing for Jeeps at his Chrysler-Plymouth-Jeep facility.

Separate showrooms for Lincoln and Mercury have been created within existing buildings by the Stu Evans Lincoln Mercury stores in two Detroit suburbs.

The five "High-line" import franchises at Lujack's North Park Plaza, Davenport, IA, have been relocated into their own building.

Dedicated buildings require dedicated sales staffs and concentration on one make instead of several.

New-car sales leads have grown to about 100 a month since Les Stanford Pontiac-Cadillac-Oldsmobile-Mazda opened a staffed showroom in the nearby Westwood Shopping Mall, Jackson, MI.

"The mall catches shoppers when our dealership is closed and the permanent personnel there can answer questions about specs, prices and availability." says Mr. Stanford. "It's been a great alternative showcase for shoppers who would rather not come to the showroom until they look at and sit in the cars first."

Other novel sales techniques include the angle of this ad from the Keyes on Van Nuys dealerships, Van Nuys, CA:

"Are you trapped? Escape your current loan or lease! Trade in your current make or model for a brand new Toyota, Lexus, Acura, Isuzu, Mazda, or pre-owned car, truck, van or sport utility!"

It's designed to invite early loan or lease terminations and has been a "big puller," says Keyes salesperson Jerry Thomas.

Meanwhile, Dwight Taylor Chevrolet-Toyota, Murray, KY, to freshen his data bank, sent people on his customer and prospect list a dollar bill in a \$3 mailer that included a postage-paid change-of-address card, \$100 coupon, a sale flier and a cover letter explaining all about the offer.

The coupon was usable towards a cash rebate, tax payment or down payment. Returns: 39 cars sold and \$58,500 netted on a \$19,500 mailer cost.

Moreover, the data base list was "purified," reports owner Dwain Taylor.

Internet initiatives are flowing at brisk rates from dealership websites to personal computers and back.

JM Lexus, Margate, FL, devotes a three-person staff to handling e-mail and web inquiries, with quick response a must.

Superior salesmanship is required to respond to highly-informed shoppers, says Mike Perry, general manager of Crest Chrysler Corp. /Chevrolet-Oldsmobile-Cadillac, North Conway, NH.

He asks salespersons to set aside up to 20 minutes a day to practice selling techniques as a self-betterment effort.

Joe Ricci's MotorQuest Dodge, Dearborn, MI, retrofitted his showroom to include a customer computer center and a small coffee bar nearby.

Bill Crispin Chevrolet's general sales manager, daughter Debbie Crispin, says their Saline, MI, dealership is ready for 2000 with the following sales approach:

"What makes customers come back is when you take care of them. Give them a choice between a low down payment for a late-model used vehicle or a new leased vehicle. Don't force them into anything.

"Chances are they'll go for the new leased vehicle. That's what the 2000-century market is all about - giving the customers not what's necessarily best for the dealership, but what's best for the customer."