

"Columbus, Ohio, Car Dealership Chain Adds Chevrolet to Stable of Brands  
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Jul. 18--Ricart Automotive, already one of the largest dealers in the nation with its ubiquitous "we're dealin'" ads, is expanding.

Two years after buying the Nourse Ford Lincoln Mercury dealerships in Delaware and Chillicothe, Ricart has purchased Sonic Automotive's Capital Chevrolet in Whitehall and is pursuing another acquisition it won't discuss.

The Chevrolet dealership at 100 S. Hamilton Rd., which once operated as Bill Swad Chevrolet, is Ricart's first General Motors franchise. It addition gives Ricart 11 nameplates and five locations.

Fred Ricart, the company's guitar-playing co-owner and pitchman, said he wants as many brands as possible to give today's pressed-for-time consumer the largest possible number of vehicle options and best selection available.

"The modern car dealership has to adapt to the buying habits of the consumer," Ricart said. "How many people do you see in McDonald's these days ordering a meal rather than using the drive-through? People are out of time."

Ricart said he's wanted to include GM products for years but that GM might have been reluctant because he is a major Ford dealer. Ricart tried but failed to buy Bobby Layman Chevrolet in Columbus in 1997.

Today, it's not unusual for a dealer or dealership group to sell Chevys and Fords or any other brand, said Steve Finlay, editor of Ward's Dealer Business.

"These are independent businessmen looking to make money in whatever franchise they decide to take on," Chevrolet spokeswoman Mary Roberts said. "(Ricart) met all the requirements we have."

Although Byers and other dealerships in central Ohio sell multiple nameplates, it's less-common to have as many as Ricart, said Paul Taylor, chief economist for the National Automobile Dealers Association.

The average association member has two franchises, he said.

Ricart Automotive promotes itself as the "world's largest automobile empire" based on total vehicle sales and its 66-acre Mega Mall in Groveport. Depending on the criteria, other dealers rank ahead of Ricart nationally.

Ricart Automotive reported sales of 12,900 new vehicles and 15,400 used vehicles last year, and Ricart said he attracts customers from five states.

Of the 91,806 new vehicles sold to Columbus-area residents last year, Ricart accounted for nearly 10 percent, according to a Dispatch review of R.L. Polk's Cross Sell data, which track purchases at dealerships.

Not all of Ricart's ventures are growing, however. The company is winding down some side businesses launched in recent years such as home mortgages and aircraft sales, Ricart said.

Ricart referred questions about them to his brother, Rhett, who couldn't be reached.

Fred Ricart said while adding Chevrolet to his offerings is "newfound business," he said buying dealerships in Delaware and other locations takes sales away from his primary location, the Mega Mall.

But he calls that a defensive move to maintain market share by ensuring another dealer doesn't take those sales away.