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Internet changes Ricart's push to selling its vehicles.

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Fourteen months after a multimillion-dollar class-action lawsuit marked the end of their Pay Days used-car chain, brothers Fred and Rhett Ricart are revving up their auto-dealership empire with a new marketing plan.

Vehicles sold at Ricart Automotive Group's 11 new-car franchises will include four-year, 100,000-mile warranties that can be transferred to new owners. Excluded from the program, which starts this month, will be the 1,000 fleet and commercial heavy-duty vehicles Ricart delivers every year.

Chief Executive Rhett Ricart said the program wasn't an effort to counter the company's image following the Pay Days suit. The company in April 2004 closed the operation that sold to credit-poor customers after settling allegations that it passed on costs of an anti-theft product to consumers who declined to buy it.

"That's over," Ricart said. "I see no repercussions from Pay Days. They are gone."

Instead, the warranty program is aimed at making the company more competitive in the age of Internet vehicle dealmaking.

A transferable warranty is expected to increase values on trade-ins, as well as protect customers if they plan to keep their vehicles after manufacturers' warranties expire.

"The average consumer will see a lot of value to it, and it will be extremely difficult for anyone else (auto dealer) to match it," Ricart said.

The expense of the warranty will be included in the company's cost of doing business, but Ricart declined to estimate how much it will add to the price of a new car. The warranties will be purchased through Ford Motor Co. and from JM&A Group, an automotive finance and insurance business in Deerfield Beach, Fla.

A cultural change

The program is added as Columbus-based Ricart Automotive encourages its sales staff to groom long-term relationships with new-car customers. Essentially, the sales rep from whom a consumer buys a vehicle becomes the customer's future contact at the company's dealerships, be it for making service appointments or buying another car.

"This reinforces the notion that you have a customer for life," Ricart said.