

Dealership thrives through recession

Bob Saks presides over a metal, chrome and vinyl-topped empire. His 17-acre dominion of foreign and domestic cars is bordered on one side by a car wash and on another by a regal 20 x 20 foot American flag.

Somewhere in the middle of a mass of new cars, used cars and rent-a-cars Saks plans to construct a \$2 million, three-story crown jewel of an office building. The structure's 25,000-square feet would be offered for rent.

At a time when other dealers are closing, the Farmington Hills car dealer is a success story worth noting.

Saks added a line of Toyotas next to his lot of Oldsmobiles. The acquisition of the foreign cars led to a new \$1 million, 26,000-square-foot showroom, opened in May.

Saks credits his ability to build at a time when the car sales business is far from booming to watching his cash flow carefully.

"A lot of dealers reaped the harvest when it was there but they didn't save for a rainy day," he says in his effusive manner.

"In the last three years it was easy to borrow money and many dealerships went under-capitalized."

When hard times began, some dealers were slow to lay off their employees, Saks adds.

SAKS LAID off 20 of his 177 employees and transferred others to his new Toyota dealership, which had its own staff. He estimates that if the addition hadn't been there, another 30 employees would have been laid off.

He staffed the new addition with management assistants in his organizations who moved up to direct their own departments.

"I'm a firm believer in in-house promotions. I want my employees to know there's something more for them than just a job," he said.

While providing an opportunity for promotions, the addition compelled Saks to insure his staff wasn't overly specialized in their selling approaches.

Members of the sales staff are encouraged to take an interested customer around the lot. If an Oldsmobile-oriented customer wants to look at another type of car, the same sales person can continue to work with them.

Such continuity is designed to make the customer feel comfortable, Saks said. To Saks, comfort makes customers.

"We want to put them in the mood to buy. We want to serve their needs," he said.

The interior of the showroom continues that sales theme.

A RED POPCORN wagon with gold trim — filled with popcorn and open to customers — is in one corner of the showroom. Next to a Toyota four-wheel drive truck is a leatherette couch and chairs. Mail-order catalogues and editions of Life and People magazines fill the coffee tables.

On the floor is a specially designed carpet which repeats the Bob Saks logo.

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