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Auto dealers shift gears, hire more women

BY CINDY KRISCHER GOODMAN
CGOODMAN@MIAMIHERALD.COM

It's a Thursday morning, a traditionally slow day in the car buying business. But today, negotiations are going throughout the showroom of Toyota of South Florida. The government's Cash for Clunkers program had jump-started a buying binge that had customers streaming in, for a change.

Gretel Santana is alternating between scrutinizing contracts and explaining to me how taken aback customers are when she walks in to finalize a sale. "They aren't expecting a female manager and that's an advantage. They don't see me as being aggressive."

I'm curious about what's happening at this Toyota dealership. Nationwide, only 12 percent of the total dealership workforce is female -- most of them are office staff. Yet, here in this family-owned dealership tucked in a heavily Hispanic neighborhood in Miami, seven women hold key management positions in various departments including finance, fleet sales and customer service.

I'm here to learn lessons that can be applied for other male-dominated workplaces where women are trying to advance. What I discover surprises me.

Lately, the entire auto business finds itself in a quandary: Even though cars have been designed, built and sold by men, the new breed of car buyers are women. Aware of this shift, more dealerships are recruiting women into sales. "The future for dealerships has to include more women," says Gerry Myers, CEO of Advisory Link and creator of a forum for women auto dealers.

There is a reason why they still are underrepresented. Sociologist Helene M. Lawson studied women in car sales over a five-year period and found the ultra-competitive environment can be treacherous for them. Male coworkers assumed that women were inadequate to the job, were more likely to quit because of family obligations, and did not belong on the sales floor. "Men blocked them at the door and managers stationed them at a safe distance from the expensive models," Lawson said.

BARRIERS

Of course, the barriers in the car business are the same as any demanding career. Just last month, one of the promising female sales agents at Toyota of South Florida quit. "You won't see as many women because it's a hard business," Santana says.

"We put in long hours which is not conducive to women with families unless you have an understanding husband."

Santana, 27, tells me she started out on the sales floor four years ago and heeded the advice given by men who mentored her. Her strong sales numbers earned her respect and she was asked to be a manager. "I have five children and the hours are horrible but I had to make a decision," she says. "The money is good."

The number of women owners has increased slightly, but there's still a definite dearth in the management ranks: more than 75 percent of dealer association's members have one female manager, but that's usually where it stops.

WRONG ASSUMPTION

When I first learned of cracks in the glass ceiling at this Doral dealership, I assumed the women managers were hiring and promoting each other. But that's not the case.

Donna Seldes is as crucial to the operation of Toyota of South Florida as the general manager. Seldes is the cousin of CEO/owner Marc Kahn and his assistant. Seldes tells me her theory on why women are making it into management at her dealership. ``Marc is open-minded. He realizes that women are detail oriented and often take the extra step."

Kahn says he initiated some of the promotions, because he sees management qualities in the women, and because it's good business: ``A lot of women feel more comfortable negotiating with women. It gives us an edge."

Research gives him incentive. CNW says 46 percent of women would rather deal with women in the car showroom than men, compared with only 9 percent of men who prefer to buy cars from other men. The rest had no preference.

TOP EARNERS

When I met Toyota of South Florida's general manager Leo Perez, I asked him to reveal numbers. I want to know if he can cite a correlation between higher sales and the uniquely high number of female managers at his organization. Without revealing specifics, Perez says that female sales reps often rank among the top earners and that the closing ratio for female sales reps is higher, as are customer satisfaction scores. He, too, considers women vital to his dealership and says he makes an extra effort to put them in roles that fit their strengths. For example, he considers Santana's people skills more suited to sales than training.

As the auto industry struggles with a recovery, I wonder whether this Miami Toyota dealership will become a model for others. Myers is convinced the recession will force changes such as greater flexibility in schedules for men and women. ``There's going to be a tremendous turnover in sales."

For his part, Kahn says he wants even more women at all levels at his dealership, ``I'm hoping they will come to buy a car, have a good experience and apply for a job."

Send your comments and ideas to Cindy Krischer Goodman at [cgoodman @MiamiHerald.com](mailto:cgoodman@MiamiHerald.com).