

Automotive News

EDWARD LAPHAM

A bullet-proof plan for my new dealership

Edward Lapham | June 19, 2007

If my wife asks for suggestions about what to get me for my birthday this year, tell her to scratch the new BBQ grille of her list. I'd rather have a Saturn dealership.

That's not as far-fetched as it might seem.

Early in my career, a friend warned me that if you write about a business long enough, you might be tempted to accept a dare: "If you're so smart, why don't you go out and do it, instead of just writing about it?"

I'd like to think I'm savvy enough to avoid falling for a sucker's challenge like that.

Then again, I know I'd be a great dealer.

Heck, I'd blow the planning potential away while driving CSI through the roof. I'd have the happiest, friendliest employees on the planet while being a generous force for fairness and righteousness in the community.

All this, while making money hand over fist.

Really.

Why Saturn, you ask?

Sheldon Sandler says there isn't much demand for Saturn stores these days, which means a decent fixer-upper shouldn't cost too much more than a highline stainless steel grille with all the options.

Sandler ought to know the market. He's managing partner of Bel Air Partners LLC, a consulting firm that primarily represents dealers trying to sell dealerships.

He's also a car guy and he knows the other secret: Saturn's product lineup is good and on the verge of getting much better, thanks to the infusion of European products. It's a bold, if somewhat belated, plan from GM that's bound to pay off.

(And, yes, I know I could do a better job running an automaker, too, but that's a column for another day.)

Once sales take off for Saturn, average dealership throughput will rise and -- poof -- the looming threat of consolidation will go away.

How's that for a bullet-proof turnaround plan?

There is one part of running a dealership that might trip me up: How would I react if some obnoxious reporter dropped by the store and started asking a lot of uninformed, asinine questions?

Jerks!

Now that I think about it, maybe it would take more than I've learned all these years of knowing and writing about successful dealers who also are decent people.

Oh well, I guess I'll put the grille back on my wish list at www.Amazon.com.