

PROFILE

Owner's focus has accelerated group's growth

Daniel Edwards has built Vision Automotive to 430 employees

By VELVET SPICER

Daniel Edwards does not do anything in a small way.

When Edwards arrived in Rochester as a 20-something looking to make it in the highly competitive automotive business, he was told by another car dealer that he would not last here.

"I didn't know anybody," recalls Edwards, owner of Vision Automotive Group. "He said, 'Kid, you'll never make it in this town. You don't understand how hard it is to make it.'"

In roughly two decades since he and his partners founded the company with one dealership, Vision has grown to 430 employees at 10 locations in the Rochester area. Last year Vision posted \$350 million in revenue and sold more than 12,000 vehicles.

Vision has ranked No. 1 in vehicle sales on the Rochester Business Journal's list of auto dealerships for the last three years.

"I guess my internal drive was to not only prove him wrong but to show everybody what we can do," says Edwards, 47.

He and two partners—James Hillery and Patrick Ucci—started Vision when they opened the former Empire Ford in Webster. In 1998 the group opened a Nissan store in Webster, and two years later it bought the Dick Ide Hyundai and Dodge stores. In 2002 it opened a Ford store in Greece, and in 2005 Vision opened a Kia store in Fairport. Vision was granted the right to open a Kia store in Canandaigua in 2009.

The partners also were involved in dealerships in the Buffalo area, including Walden Dodge.

In 2012, Ucci suggested that the others purchase his stake in the dealerships. They came to an agreement whereby Edwards



Photo by Kimberly McNamara

would buy the Rochester-area locations and Hillery would buy the Buffalo facilities. So in December 2012, Edwards became sole owner of the Vision dealerships in Rochester.

Last year he partnered with Michael

Piehler in his Buick-GMC and Landrover-Jaguar stores. Vision is opening a Nissan store in Canandaigua as well as Vision Auto Direct, a used-car concept that Edwards describes as a hybrid of Auction Direct USA and CarMax Inc. models.

"It's a one-price selling system, but with a six-month warranty rather than one month. It's free oil changes as long as they own the vehicle," he says, "so within the next year, three or four additional (Vision Auto Direct) locations opening."

The company also is opening an additional franchise in Webster, though Edwards is unable to discuss details because of an agreement with the manufacturer. The additional stores will put Vision's employment at more than 500 by year's end, he says.

"For me personally, December of 2012 was just the start of where we're going to grow the company. I'm 47, and I'm really enthused and excited every day I come in to work," Edwards says. "We've got so much going on, and I love it."

Automotive roots

Edwards was born and raised in Cortland. His father worked in maintenance for an apartment complex that his mother managed. Edwards had no intention of getting a college degree; he had dreams of being a musician and painting cars for a living.

"I wasn't good at either," he says with a laugh, but when he was young, his dad played in a band and the two spent time fixing old cars in their garage for extra money.

Edwards learned auto body work at a Board of Cooperative Educational Services in high school and was given permission to work on his father's old car in class throughout the year.

"I took my dad's '53 Chevy with one lit-

tle dent it had in it, and when I brought it home, it had about 800 dents," he recalls. "I was terrible, but I didn't know it."

His father broke the news that auto body work likely was not the career for him.

"At the end of 11th grade, you're thinking, 'What do I do now?'" Edwards says. "So my mom said to me, 'You seem to be pretty good at math; why don't you look at going to college?'"

"I guess I have a 100 percent belief that when a customer comes here, they're looking to buy a car, and it's our job to help them find what they like."

Edwards received his marketing and finance degree from SUNY College at Oswego in 1988 and quickly headed to California, where he worked for Ford Motor Co. as a parts and service representative.

When his boss left for a job with Chrysler in Syracuse, Edwards accompanied him to work as a factory representative. Back in New York and working with dealers, Edwards says, he learned how to take care of the customer.

"I saw many very well-run dealerships that focused on customer satisfaction, that could sustain the good and bad markets," Edwards says. "And I saw many dealers that were just focused on the quick sale and not taking care of the customer. And they went out of business."

Following his tenure with Chrysler, Edwards had a five-year stint selling cars. That was when he received the call to become a partner in the dealerships in Buffalo and Rochester. He took what he learned about customer focus with him, he says.

"I always thought if I ever had the opportunity to buy a dealership, as long as I focused on customer satisfaction, I could be in business a long time," Edwards says. "The customer is literally at the top of everything, of our complete organizational chart. Everything we do focuses on how to better serve them."

Culture

The dealerships' success is a result of the employees and their empathy for the customer, he says.

"They understand the philosophy that my partners and I had, which was always focus on the customer," Edwards says. "They feel it and they execute on it, and they do it with a great amount of passion and energy. That's what has allowed us to grow expo-

entially."

So far this year, Vision's sales are up 21 percent over last year, Edwards notes.

Attending to customers is only one facet of the company's growth and success, says Mark Ledtke, Vision's district manager, Rochester market.

"Taking care of customers and taking care of employees," he says of the company's formula. "We're having a lot of success and very grateful to the community for it."

He describes the atmosphere at Vision as fun and family-oriented, but at the same time exhibiting professionalism.

"We want to run our business honestly, ethically and with integrity," Ledtke says. "That's the culture. The pace is heavy. We're extremely busy."

Danielle DiLorenzo, controller and chief financial officer, has been with the company some 15 years, since she was in high school. Her longevity is a testament to the dealership's principles and friendly atmosphere, she says.

"It feels like the Vision employees are part of my family, maybe because I've grown up in Vision from 15 to age 31," she says. "It's what made me not want to work anywhere else, because that alone is pretty priceless to me."

And when employees are happy, customers sense that, she adds.

"It's not about going to work and dreading going to work and counting down the hours to leave," she says. "I've always enjoyed coming to work every day. I think it's huge for the customer to see that."

What sets the dealership group apart from its many competitors is Vision's focus and relationships with customers, DiLorenzo says.

"It's not about the bottom line. It's not about making a profit. It's about maintaining our customer base," she says. "It's not about 'We sold a car to this customer; now we don't have to worry about them anymore.'"

DiLorenzo describes Edwards as someone who will find a common interest with employees to forge a connection.

"I think what's so wonderful about Dan is that he can look at each and every person and see what's different about them, what motivates them, and work with them in that aspect," she says. "I think that's what gets the best work out of somebody, when they feel like they matter."

Ledtke calls Edwards hands-on and centered.

"He focuses on the items that get the results, and he helps you pinpoint that," he adds.

Edwards has an energy level that is infectious, Ledtke says.

Daniel Edwards

Position: Owner, Vision Automotive Group

Age: 47

Home: Webster

Family: Wife Margie; daughter Kay, 18; and son David, 15

Education: B.S., marketing, 1988, SUNY College at Oswego

Passions: Family time, music, snowboarding, snowmobiling, mountain biking, flying

Quote: "I always thought if I ever had the opportunity to buy a dealership, as long as I focused on customer satisfaction, I could be in business a long time. The customer is literally at the top of everything, of our complete organizational chart. Everything we do focuses on how to better serve them."