

For Capitol Auto owner, it's about people, not cars

By LYNDON A. ZAITZ
Of the Keizertimes

Scott Casebeer, principal owner of Capitol Auto Group, is a car dealer who isn't much of a fan of cars — even those he sells.

He'd rather be riding a horse or encouraging his employees to get involved with their community.

Capitol Auto Group had its start in 1927 when Douglas McKay opened Douglas McKay Chevrolet Co.; he later added a Cadillac dealership. McKay went on to serve as Salem mayor, a state senator, Oregon governor and U.S. Secretary of Interior under President Eisenhower.

McKay sold the dealership to his two sons-in-law—Lester Green and Wayne Hadley, who changed the name to Capitol Chevrolet Cadillac; a Toyota franchise was added later. Scott Casebeer married into the family in 1977 and bought out Green and Hadley. After his divorce he began the dealer and sole owner.

Capitol Auto Group recently moved the dealership and its four brands (Chevrolet, Cadillac, Toyota and Subaru) to a large campus on the Salem Parkway between Broadway Street and Cherry Avenue. The move was precipitated by manufacturer's architectural requirements that could not be met on Mission Street.

"All the manufacturers started to get very aggressive with individual designs for facilities," said Casebeer. "If you wanted to maintain the franchise and the ability to get new vehicles and products, sooner or later you'd have to conform to their design."

It is ironic that Scott Case-



Capitol Auto Group principal owner Scott Casebeer in his office off Salem Parkway. KEIZERTIMES/Lyndon A. Zaitz

beer owns a dealership with four brands; he's not a car guy. He never tinkered with them when he was a teen. He's never driven a Cadillac. He never sat in a Honda when he owned a Honda dealership. When he owned a Ford dealership he never even drove one.

"I just like the people part of the business," said Casebeer, "And just the business part." He went on to say that if someone told him he could get a better return by selling pickles one would see nothing but a brunch of pickles on his dealership lot.

"I'll sell pickles," he said. "I don't care. Cars? I don't care."

He's never even had a car title registered in his name. He tells his management team, "Listen, don't get too caught up in these cars. It's just a car."

Casebeer may not care about cars, per se, but he has established a company that always puts people first, be they customers or employees. He stated the company's motto—

Have it your way on the Parkway—is lived everyday by every employee at Capitol Auto Group.

"We will handle a sales transaction anyway the customer wants," said Casebeer. If a customer knows what they want and how much they want to spend or if a customer wants to test drive a few models before deciding, they get it. The internet has changed the way people buy cars, many consumers doing their research before heading to a car lot. "The personal touch is gone," said Casebeer.

With the growth of Uber and other ride-hailing services plus the development of driverless cars, the auto industry will change drastically in the coming years. "The franchise dealer as we know of today might be going the way of the dodo in the next 20 to 25 years," said Casebeer. Many young people, especially in cities, don't even own a car—a rite of passage that was cel-

ebrated by teens for decades.

Yet today is still good times for auto dealers. In 2015 the auto industry recorded its best year for national sales; that level of sales is expected to continue into 2017 and perhaps 2018, according to industry analysts. As long as people want to buy cars, especially his brands, Casebeer will be sure that his customers are taken care of by employees who are well trained and inspired to give back to their community.

"Ninety-nine percent of businesses will say that customers come first," said Casebeer. "In my opinion, customers don't come first, employees come first. If they (employees) are happy, engaged and understand what they need to do and they're excited to come to work reflected to our customers."

Prior to the interview, Casebeer was talking with 25 new employees from across the company—sales, service, parts, etc. Capitol Auto Group

has developed an environment that rewards good work. Each month the company recognizes sales people who have met goals and those employees of any department that have had a positive impact on the company.

Every day every employee has an interaction with a manager, whether it is Casebeer himself or another person. Employees are singled out for birthdays, new babies, company news is announced, such as new product or new promotions. Each paycheck is accompanied with a company newsletter and there is a company website dedicated to employees.

Asked where he learned his management skills, Scott Casebeer quickly cites his best friend Ed Maletis, former chairman of Columbia Distributing Company. "He was a real mentor to me," said Casebeer. "He taught me how to deal with managers, what reports to look at. He taught me tenacity. What issues to tackle."

The main thing he learned from Maletis is that one person can't do it all, it's a team effort. "You first and foremost have to be a good teammate, it won't happen otherwise," said Casebeer.

The employees of Capitol Auto Group really come together as a team when it comes to the community involvement and philanthropy of the company. Employees are encouraged to be actively involved, going so far as to pay their wages for a day when they are volunteering.

Each year Capitol Auto Group holds activities, con-

tests and competitions within the company to raise money for United Way Mid-Willamette Valley. This year, during its annual 28 Days of Love in February, the company and its employees raised \$135,000, bringing its two year total to about \$250,000, making Capitol Auto among the top three contributors to the local United Way campaign. Giving back to the community is one of the values the company lives by; it starts with the hiring process when new employees learn about the commitment to the community and its needs.

"They have great imagination over there," said Randy Franke, executive director of United Way Mid-Willamette Valley. "I'm impressed by both Scott and Carrie. Giving back to the community, it's not just a motto; they're serious about it."

When Casebeer is not overseeing his dealership from his second story corner office above the Chevrolet store, he and his wife, Carrie, enjoy time on their horse farm east of Salem. Scott's office is filled with photos, tributes and artifacts, including a horse saddle that has pride of place in the corner. Someday soon he will leave his position and retire (he says it'll be sometime after the first of the year) leaving the operation of Capitol Auto Group in the hands of his sons, Alex and Matthew.

For a man who doesn't really care about cars, Casebeer has grown a business into a four-brand, family juggernaut that sits atop the Salem auto business.

"He taught me tenacity. What issues to tackle."

— Scott Casebeer
Capitol Auto owner

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