



Business

An Interview with Scott Thomason of Thomason Auto Group

BY DAN BELL
OF THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Scott Thomason usually ends his commercials with the household phrase, "If you don't come see me today, I can't save you any money." The car magnate has taken a single Ford car dealership and transformed it into the northwest's premier mega dealership encompassing 1200 employees and \$750 million in sales. On the way, he has incurred some rough spots, the latest obstacle being a number of civil right complaints lodged with the Bureau of Labor and Industries and the Equal Opportunity Commission. On July 14, The Portland Observer met with Mr. Thomason regarding the issue of these complaints. The following interview is an excerpt from that conversation. The Portland Observer: One of the first questions I would like to ask you is, "What is your take on the civil rights complaints?"

Thomason: What do you mean by "take?"

The Portland Observer: There have been other civil rights complaints in the local auto industry. You have had a perception of being insulated by your general managers. I've talked to Brain Poole (one of the complainants). He said he talked to his general manager, but he never had the opportunity to talk with you.

Thomason: That's changed... My take is that we take every complaint seriously. We investigate what's going on and try to find out what really occurred, and then we take it from there. But I have zero tolerance personally. Zero tolerance.

The Portland Observer: Do you think it was the culture of the general managers? Do you think it was a lack of the line staff's being able to talk to you set the predicament up?

Thomason: I don't think we ever set the environment up for this to happen... You're talking about some isolated complaints. Of those complaints, even the last three were placed over a year ago. These are not recent complaints... March 15, 2000, was when I started doing town hall meetings and talk to every employee in this company in a period of six weeks personally. I stressed the importance of a positive work environment. I personally told every

employee that I have zero tolerance for any sort of discrimination or harassment. I got through the whole company in six weeks. Now I am doing that with new hires about once a month.

The Portland Observer: You do this yourself?

Thomason: I do that personally. You alluded to the fact that, yeah, I have been a little removed from the operation, and we're changing that; because in order to change the culture of this company, it needs to come from me first. I realize that and spend a lot of time on that.

The Portland Observer: You grew up in the car business. You know that many sales people are cynical about people in general and that they have little regard for their fellow man. So what do you think about the incident involving Mr. Poole in light of such a Cynical atmosphere?

Thomason: Maybe that has been part of the industry... it is not part of my company, and I have been clear on that. That is grounds for termination.

The Portland Observer: Have you cleaned house?

Thomason: I don't know if "cleaned house" is the right word, but I will tell you that there have been those who did not buy into the new company culture, and they are not here anymore.

The Portland Observer: That's pretty important. You know most people think that you are taking action only in response to Federal pressure resulting from the suits.

Thomason: When this came out, I

had no knowledge of this. Discrimination is the furthest thing from my mind. I have never ever had those thoughts in my heart... So I studied that. I said I've got to learn about the African-American—I guess the African-American Culture. So I flew two consultants out from Washington D.C. and hired them. I spent the day with them. They took me through what really happened out there, and I was blown away and educated. I also locally had Matt Hennessy. He came down and talked to the group for quite a while. I'm getting up to speed now, so I understand — so I understand how the African-American feels—so I can communicate that to my people. In summary, Mr. Thomason has implemented over eight corrective action items in his effort to change the culture of Thomason Auto Group, including but not limited to the following actions:

- In June 1999, requiring all employees to review and endorse the Ashbury Automotive Group's Policy Prohibiting Sexual Harassment and the Equal Opportunity Policy. Thomason Auto Group's Employee Handbook was also updated between August 1998 and June 1999 to include a zero tolerance policy for all forms of discrimination and harassment.

- In August 1999, requiring all managers to attend four hours of training given by independent counsel, called "Employment law for managers."

- In November 1999, hired Alan Lave as director of Human Resources

Director. Lave has 20 years experience in the human resources arena, holding high-level HR positions at Nike, Stanton Industries and Smuckers.

- In February 2000, opening the Employees Resource Center, led by Al Lave. This provides employees with one central location for all payroll, training, hiring, management and other HR issues.

- In March 2000, beginning town hall meetings between Scott Thomason and employee groups. The meetings give Scott the opportunity to explain the philosophies of TAG and Ashbury Automotive, and to listen to employee concerns.

- In May 2000, launched supervisory training through a 12-16 hour course covering topics such as interviewing, hiring, equal employment opportunity (EEO), diversity, conflict resolution, coaching, counseling and employment law.

It should be relatively clear that he responded with due diligence to change a culture that historically held a cynical view of the world and generally requires little or no education to be a part of it. A change at Thomason Auto Group will affect the whole industry, putting other major dealers on notice that they have more social responsibilities than just making a profit.

As a footnote, Mr. Thomason says that he is available to speak to any interested group concerning his policy and operation of the Thomason Auto Group in regarding civil rights or sexual harassment issues. If your organization is interested, you can contact Erika.



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Stations in Arbor Lodge (on Interstate at Portland Blvd & Lombard)
Thursday, August 24, 5:30-8 pm (part of Arbor Lodge Fair)
Peace Lutheran Church
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(Tri-Met bus 40)
Arbor Lodge Fair is sponsored by Arbor Lodge Neighborhood Association & Peace Lutheran Church

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Providence Bridge Pedal

More than 13,000 people from throughout the Northwest are expected to bike and hike the bridges in one of the nation's largest community biking events. The fifth annual Providence Bridge Pedal and Providence Bridge Stride takes place Sunday, August 13, 2000, from 7 am. to 1:30 pm. in downtown Portland.

The Providence Bridge Pedal is a 27-mile bicycle ride starting between 7 and 8:30 am. and crossing eight of Portland's bridges including the Hawthorne, Ross Island, Marquam, Burnside, Steel, Fremont, St. Johns and Broadway. This year's 27-mile ride will result in the following traffic changes on the bridges:

Fremont Bridge - The top deck of the Fremont Bridge (I-405 South) will be closed from 5:30 to 11:30 am. Travelers should take I-5 South over the bottom deck of the Marquam Bridge, which will remain open throughout the event, to get to I-405, Highway 26 and I-5 South.

Hawthorne Bridge - The eastbound lanes will be closed from 5:30 to 11:30 am. The westbound lanes will remain open throughout the event. Travelers headed eastbound to Northeast and Southeast Portland should take the Broadway, Burnside or Steel bridges.

Marquam Bridge - The top deck of the Marquam Bridge (I-5 North) will be closed from 5:30 to 10:30 am. Travelers should take I-405 North to get to Highway 26 and the bottom deck of the Fremont Bridge, which will remain open throughout the event, to get to I-5 North and I-84 East.

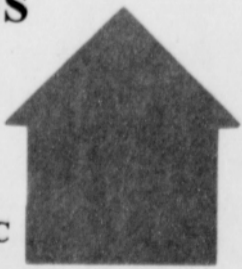
Ross Island Bridge - Bikers will ride westbound and the bridge is closed for construction.

Steel Bridge - The Steel Bridge will be closed from 6:30 to 11 am. Travelers headed westbound to downtown Portland should take the Broadway, Burnside, Hawthorne and Morrison bridges. TriMet and MAX light rail will continue to operate and use the bridge.



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FHA loans are approved by many of the same banks that I described above, but since they are guaranteed by the Federal Government, the rules are different and much easier. Common sense actually rules here! Let's look

at the differences between FHA loans and typical conventional loans.

- FHA uses tougher appraisal standards
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- Simplified and inexpensive refinancing programs
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- Aside from your down payment, sellers can pay all of your closing costs.
- Since FHA is a government agency, they encourage banks to make low income loans to help communities. Remember, ask your lender questions! That's it for now. Let me know if you have any questions or suggestions for future articles.
- David Labovitz, Mortgage Market, Inc., 503/234-5160.



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