

Auto Dealer Plots Roadmap for Surviving, Thriving

One of the most tumultuous years in the automotive industry, 2008 saw layoffs and closures involving plants and dealerships across the country. Nevertheless, some companies employed successful strategies to weather the storm.

That group includes Tom Wood Automotive Group, one of the state's largest automotive dealer chains. Headquartered in Indianapolis, the company employs more than 600 people and operates 17 franchises throughout Central Indiana, Kentucky and Minnesota. In addition, it has an independent quality leasing company in Indianapolis and a small finance company.

Among its franchises are Subaru, Jaguar, Porsche, Ford and Honda.

"I don't think there was a dealership in the country that wasn't affected," contends vice president and CFO Larry Heid when reflecting on the fallout from the Big Three's near

collapse and continued difficulties.

He credits internal proactive measures with offsetting potential setbacks.

"We started looking at our expenses and inventories back in mid-summer, so I think Tom Wood kind of saw what was coming and said, 'we need to be watching this a little closer and get out ahead of it,'" Heid asserts. "We approached it like we had to control what we could control. It was down to the basics: watching our overhead and cutting costs."

While it's difficult to predict what this year has in store for the auto industry, Heid appears cautiously optimistic.

"I think it will still be a challenge for most of 2009, so we kind of have to stay the same course in terms of watching our expenses and inventories," he surmises. "It will eventually turn around, but there are still some definite challenges ahead."

Resource: Larry Heid, Tom Wood Automotive Group, at www.tomwood.com

Housing Downturn Doesn't Slow This Storage Business

Tightening credit and "For Sale" signs dotting residential neighborhoods illustrate the housing slowdown and economic implications for industries like banking and construction. The impact on a related business sector – self-storage – has received less attention, but is an important part of the big picture.

Jefferson Shreve is the founder and president of Bloomington-based Storage Express, which manages approximately 75 self-storage locations in five states: Indiana (throughout the southern part of the state and into the central portions), Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee.

"I'm in a recession-resistant, but not a recession-proof kind of industry," he muses. "We certainly feel the challenges of the economic climate we're in, but there are some positives to a cycle like this for the industry, and we're trying really hard to continue growing the business."

The credit crisis tops his list of obstacles in buying land for business expansion.

"It's not that I can't get credit, but I can't get financing under the same terms I did over the last decade," he explains. Still, Shreve asserts that self-storage businesses can continue to grow amidst home foreclosures and downsizing.

"The upside to this cycle for self-storage is when customers move into smaller households, they still need a place for their stuff," he remarks. "We have couples that have had to move from a single-family house into an apartment, or people in an apartment may have lost a job and are moving back in with their folks."

Resource: Jefferson Shreve, Storage Express, at www.storageexpress.com



Consumers Spare Little Expense on Pets

Americans poured an estimated \$43 billion into the pet industry last year, according to the American Pet Products Association. That's a 5.5% increase from 2007 (when spending topped \$41 billion). Along with necessities such as food and veterinary care, expenses went toward luxuries like boarding, grooming and toys.

Midnight Sun Dog Resort, located in Argos, offers a "home away from home" atmosphere for its cuddly canine guests. Janet Barlow established the business in 1996 with her husband, Eric. The couple lives on the sprawling 40-acre property to provide around-the-clock pet care.

Despite concerns that soaring gas prices and economic hardships in 2008 would curtail customers' traveling (thus eliminating the need to board their pets), Janet notes, "We haven't seen much difference, and it's been encouraging. I think people are still dedicating whatever salaries they have toward their pets."

Amenities at Midnight Sun Dog Resort include a fenced-in play yard (including a pool and obedience tunnels), spa treatments (pampered pooches receive pedicures and even wear bath robes), a self-serve pet wash and soft music wafting through the facility 24 hours a day to help create a soothing ambiance. Plus, the penthouse package features a television, Woofy-Pop popcorn, Frosty Paws Frozen Treats for Dogs ice cream and more.

Resources: American Pet Products Association at www.americanpetproducts.org

Janet Barlow, Midnight Sun Dog Resort, at (574) 892-6993 or www.midnightsundogresort.com

Mishawaka Machine Shop Receives National Award

Step onto a civilian or military airplane anywhere in the United States and you're aboard an aircraft with parts supplied by Allied Specialty Precision, an aerospace manufacturing company operating in Mishawaka since 1954. In late 2008, it was honored by *American Machinist* as one of the top 10 machine shops in the country.

Winners were determined by findings from the magazine's annual Benchmark Survey of American Machine Shops, which identifies companies with outstanding practices in categories such as human resources, inventories, capital equipment, supply chain and information technology. Approximately 215 businesses participated.

Pam Rubenstein, CEO and owner of Allied Specialty Precision, recalls the procedure. "Based on survey results, they

(magazine editors) narrow down their choices and come to the facility to do interviews and look around the shop to see that you are what you say you are."

She points to her company's skilled workforce (consisting of approximately 65 employees), training programs, use of cutting-edge technology and in-house manufacturing processes as key factors in garnering a spot on the top 10 list. Allied Specialty Precision was the only honoree from Indiana.

"Because every part we make flies, there is no room for error," Rubenstein stresses. "It is your life on the line when you get on a plane, and we understand that and take that very seriously."

Resource: Allied Specialty Precision at (574) 255-4718 or www.aspi-nc.com

Unique Waterproofing Technology Making Waves

Forget to bring your iPod inside before the rain began? Accidentally spill water on your laptop computer? A new waterproofing coating process developed by the Northeast Maritime Institute (NMI) in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, can prevent such scenarios from damaging your electronics.

The technology – called Golden Shellback™ – grew out of an effort to provide mariners who have fallen overboard with a way to communicate with crew members. The Golden Shellback coating process protects equipment from exposure to weather, moisture, oils and hazardous materials by producing a clear, vacuum-induced film that is applied to gadgets, both internally and externally.

Currently, Golden Shellback (a trademark of NMI) offers coating for equipment ranging from a BlackBerry and VHF 55 radio (priced at \$120 per each unit coded) to a pair of speakers (\$180) as large as eight inches in diameter.

Applicable to any solid surface, the Golden Shellback waterproof coating lends itself to additional platforms such as medical devices; hazardous waste transportation equipment; and metal, wood, plastic, paper and textiles.

**Resources: Golden Shellback at www.golden-shellback.com
Northeast Maritime Institute at www.northeastmaritime.com**



Shorts written by Symone C. Skrzycki

Fax is Far From Obsolete

Amid the Internet explosion in the 1990s, the fax machine was seemingly in danger of relegation to dusty office corners. Around the same time, however, an advanced form of faxing was unveiled – the Internet fax – which has steadily grown in popularity.

Online faxing transmits documents directly into recipients' e-mail inboxes. The allure stems from convenience, cost savings (reducing consumption of printer paper and toner, and negating the need for a separate fax line) and an eco-friendly set-up.

Launched in 1997, MyFax is a leading Internet fax service whose presence encompasses North America, Europe and the United Kingdom. Each month, it gains more than 15,000 subscribers.

Customers pay \$10 monthly for 300 faxes (100 outbound and 200 inbound). They can send single faxes to multiple recipients (50 or fewer) and attach documents in formats such as Word and Excel.

Washington, Indiana-based Jones & Sons is a provider of building and landscaping materials such as ready-mixed concrete. The company – which has additional locations in Vincennes, Terre Haute, Bloomfield and Plainville – implemented MyFax technology in early 2008.

Purchaser Shannon Crane, who works out of her home in Illinois, says online faxing makes it easy to accommodate vendors (most prefer communication via fax) and maintain an electronic filing system.

At Young Plumbing (it serves customers throughout Northwest Indiana) office manager Valerie Pena also began using the service last year.

She asserts, "It's a big time saver. It lets us work greener. (And it offers) confidentiality. If I'm dealing with HR files, it's nice to be able to send a fax without anyone else seeing it."

Resources: MyFax at www.myfax.com

Shannon Crane, Jones & Sons, at www.jonesandsons.com

Valerie Pena, Young Plumbing, at www.youngplumbing.com