

Daily Herald

AUTOFOCUS

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SECTION 9

Auto Sunday

Auto repair decisions are weighed vs. buying used

Q. I have a 1993 Buick Park Avenue and it is starting to show signs of needing \$1,500 to \$2,000 of mechanical repair. I don't drive too far anymore. Do you think it is worth fixing and continue to drive it or look for something newer?

A. It's hard to answer your question without seeing the car, but in general terms the Park Avenue is a very good car and is capable of running well for many miles. If the car still looks

good, meets your general transportation needs and the \$2,000 puts it in top mechanical condition, then I think it would make sense to repair it. \$2,000 is less than the sales tax on a \$30,000 car.

If the car no longer meets your needs and money is no object, then now is a great time to buy a new car. You could buy a used car but you already have one of those; after fixing yours up you will know exactly what you have. You could buy something used and end up having to put some money into it anyway.

Having it checked out by your mechanic can minimize the possibility of any surprises, but stuff can always go wrong. If buying a new or newer car means financing most of the purchase price, then I would stay with what you have.

Q. My check engine light has been on forever, it seems. The vehicle seems to run OK. Is there any harm in ignoring this?

A. It may or may not do any mechanical harm to the car depending on what problem the onboard computer is seeing. Some failures could lead to reduced fuel economy, which could be more expensive than the repair over a period of time. You also might be emitting more emissions than you should. Finally, you will not pass the emissions test with a light on.

In most cases the diagnostic charge for finding out why a SES (Service Engine Soon) light is on will not be that hard to swallow.

One final thought; when we start ignoring warning lights, even though everything seems to be running OK, we can be lulled into a false sense of security only to find out later that we have created a bigger problem for ourselves.

My advice, fix the problem. You will feel very happy not to stare at a warning light every time you drive your car.

• Douglas Automotive is at 312 S. Hager Ave., Barrington, and 7218B Virginia Road, Crystal Lake. E-mail questions to underthehood@dailyherald.com.

Toyota passes GM as top automaker

Bloomberg News

DETROIT — Toyota Motor Corp. ended General Motors Corp.'s 77-year reign as the world's largest automaker. GM's 2008 sales fell more than 11 percent to 8.35 million vehicles, the company said last week. Toyota posted a 4 percent drop to 8.972 million. While the global sales title is only "symbolic," being No. 1 for the first time may put "a lot of pressure on Toyota" because other automakers will be chasing it, said Rebecca Lindland, an IHS Global Insight analyst in Lexington, Mass.

Volkswagen dealer sees silver lining

BY ARLENE MILES
Daily Herald Correspondent

Don't tell Emir Abinon that the automobile business in the United States is all gloom and doom. If you look hard enough, you can find some bright spots.

In the midst of an economy where automobile sales have experienced a steady decline, Abinon has opened a new Volkswagen dealership in West Chicago and purchased an existing location in Schaumburg, achieving success with both. Particularly remarkable is that in December, while most dealerships braced themselves for abysmal sales, Fox Valley Volkswagen's Schaumburg location (formerly Ed Murphy Volkswagen) experienced its highest sales volume in 18 months.

Born in the Philippines, Abinon emigrated to the United States when he was 6 years old. He grew up on Chicago's west side and attended Lane Tech High School, then North Park College, majoring in business. An effort to earn money to pay for his college classes led him into the automobile business.

What was your first car?

"A 1974 Mazda RX4 with a rotary engine that I bought when I was in high school."

How did you get started in the automobile business?

"After my sophomore year in college, I was looking for a way to earn more money to pay for school, so I answered an ad from Jerry Gleason Ford in Niles. I started there as a full-time sales associate in the summer, part-time in the winter while I was going to school. Three years later, I became general manager of the dealership. Jerry Gleason still remains a close friend and mentor today. He taught me the basics of the car business, but he taught me to do it exceptionally well. Jerry played a very big part in shaping my philosophy and the value of business integrity."

What do you like about the automobile sales industry?

"In this country, we have always had a love affair with cars. It's not something we use to get from Point A to Point B. If you're honest and upfront with someone, they'll come back to you because people want a friend in the car business."

How has the industry changed during the years you have been in business?

"The shift started about 20 years ago with a stronger emphasis on service. You need to have a strong basis in service these days."

"Also the Internet plays a bigger role in how people choose their cars. It used to be that people went from dealership to dealership to shop. Now they look on the Internet first and narrow down where they go. We have also sold and shipped cars to people on both coasts, as well as Norway and Greenland, so it's no longer just local."



Emir Abinon, left, president of Fox Valley Volkswagen, has expanded the dealership to Schaumburg with the help of his vice president, Shakeel Omar.

PHOTOS BY BOB CHWEDYK/bchwedyk@dailyherald.com

Auto Biography

FOX VALLEY VOLKSWAGEN



Emir Abinon, president and general manager

Locations:

Schaumburg
1000 E. Golf Road
(847) 839-8101

West Chicago
560 W. North Ave.
(630) 231-9100
myfoxvalleyvw.com

Tagline: "Where satisfied customers tell the tale"

Showroom hours: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday; 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday.

Service hours: 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday; 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

What is your business philosophy?

"I like to think that in all of the stores that I've had, I've had the same values in my business life as I have in my personal life; I'm a Christian and that's important to me. I have had people buy cars from me 20 years later, even though I am now selling a different brand of cars. It's not the vehicle, but the individual they come for because if you are comfortable, you want to stay with them."

How did you turn around Landmark Ford?

When I purchased

Landmark Ford in 1992, it was the highest complaint (Ford) store in the country. Within three years, we had turned it around. When you go into a situation like this, it's easy to think that the people working there are at fault. But after being there a few months, it wasn't the people but the values that were in place.

"We started some team-building to develop camaraderie, plus events like company picnics and trips to Great America. When people get to know one another in events outside of work, it breaks down barriers and becomes easier to solve problems together at work. We went from being the highest complaint store in the country to winning the Ford President's Award for customer service in 2000, 2001, and 2002."

How do you motivate your employees?

"We have a guiding principles statement that outlines how we treat our customers. It covers quality, integrity, continuous improvement, beneficial relationships with suppliers and manufacturers and centers on how customers are the focus of everything we do. If everyone is working off the same song sheet, if you give employees a vision, they will want to follow."

"We have leadership meetings once a week where we take care of any issues that have come up. My job is to take all the red tape away from the leaders and managers so they can do their job. Plus, you give them some autonomy to solve problems. When you empower them in this way, they feel good about solving a problem."

Why did you switch from selling Fords to selling Volkswagens?

"Ford had been losing market share for five years. At the time, Ford wanted us to build



Abinon believes models like the Beetle, right, makes Volkswagen a fun brand to own and drive.

a new showroom in Niles and that just wasn't feasible.

"We started working with Volkswagen back in 2002. They wanted someone to open a dealership in the St. Charles area. It's difficult to get an open point, but Volkswagen took a look at us and what we had done and we were approved. So in July 2006, we opened up a brand new store in West Chicago and quickly became the No. 1 Volkswagen dealership in customer satisfaction for sales and service in the state of Illinois and 15th in volume out of 150 dealers in the central United States. We ended up selling Landmark back to Ford."

What does Volkswagen have to offer to the American consumer?

"When I visited the Wolfsburg plant in Germany, I was pleasantly surprised by the attention to detail that they put into their cars. Domestic brands give you a lot of incentives and rebates to buy, but is the car really worth that much? Volkswagen doesn't give price incentives. I would rather see manufacturers bring the price levels of cars down to what they're worth. What this does is that in the used car market, the value of Volkswagens doesn't drop as fast."

"It's also a fun brand. There's some wonderful nostalgia with Volkswagen because everyone seems to have a story that they either learned to drive in a Beetle or rode in one as a kid."

How does having your long-time friend Shakeel Omar as a partner help your business?

"Shakeel runs our used car operation and he's the best person that I know of to run this part of the business. I've known him for 25 years, when we were both working at Jerry Gleason Ford. He goes to the used car auctions and buys cars off auctions on the Internet. This is an important part of our business as our ratio of new car sales to pre-driven is nearly one to one."

Emir Abinon timeline

1984: Sales associate, Jerry Gleason Ford, Niles

1987: General manager, Jerry Gleason Ford, Niles

1992: Purchased Landmark Ford, Niles

2006: Founded Fox Valley Volkswagen, West Chicago

2008: Purchased Ed Murphy Volkswagen, Schaumburg

How can an automobile dealership survive in this economy?

"There is no silver bullet answer to that question. A good dealer doesn't necessarily mean having the best price. It means taking care of the customer. As an owner/dealer, you also need to spend time with your employees."

"Obviously, you have to control expenses. Having two locations in adjacent markets allows us to consolidate operations in the areas of purchasing, personnel and marketing and advertising."

Is financing difficult to obtain?

"We haven't seen any problems. Volkswagen Credit is our major partner, and unlike GMAC, Volkswagen Credit only finances vehicles purchased from Volkswagen stores. The strength of the brand is perfected by the strength of their financial arm. We get wonderful support from them."

How do you give back to the community?

"We have donated vans to the Riverwoods Christian Center in St. Charles, which helps underprivileged kids. We have also helped the Bartlett Learning Center and the Lazarus House homeless shelter. We also had a Christmas party this year where we gathered toys for the Salvation Army. Our employees also volunteer at many of these institutions we support."



The former Ed Murphy dealership in Schaumburg is now Fox Valley Volkswagen, which originated in West Chicago.