

Growing car dealer buys a 'mom-and-pop'

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With cornfields rolling in the distance and a highway just beyond the showroom windows, Lancaster County Motors' new franchise at the Buck is perched on the edge of two worlds.

"It's in the country but it's really not," explained LCM General Manager Craig A. Deibler. "We think that's an advantage."

LCM's Providence Pontiac GMC dealership at 1008 Lancaster Pike is near its rural customer base yet also lies along major corridors that can link it to larger markets.

The business formerly owned by Dick Wenger and known as Wenger Pontiac GMC Truck will be moved to a new, larger facility within two years, according to Deibler. But it won't stray more than a mile to two from its roots.

"We're looking to stay real close," said Deibler, who owns LCM with the families of Michael Mann and his siblings. "We want to do everything we can to service ('Wenger's') present clients."

At the same time, the company will pursue new customers from Lancaster and points south, east and west.

Lancaster County Motor's latest acquisition is part of a long-term trend toward larger car franchises here.

But Deibler says the demise of the mom-and-pops means better value, more consistent quality and greater selections for customers.

LCM now handles Mercedes-Benz, Subaru, Mitsubishi, Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep, Pontiac and GMC vehicles.

"It's a fun thing to represent a broad line of cars," Deibler said. And when customers are comparison shopping, it makes good business sense to be able to refer customers to various members of what LCM calls its "Family of Dealerships."

"It's a good back-and-forth relationship," Lancaster County Motors originally sold Packards, Studebakers and MGs.

The East Petersburg-based business became a Mercedes-Benz dealership in 1957.

In 1972, it branched out by adding a Subaru franchise. Mitsubishi's joined the fold in 1993.

The company began expanding southward in 1998 when it acquired the former Quarryville Chrysler Plymouth Dodge at 2302 Beaver Valley Pike. The following year, it moved that dealership to a new #1.3 million facility on Route 272 in Providence Township.

In 2001, Deibler said, the company spent \$3 million on a new Mercedes-Benz showroom complete with putting green, boutique and massage therapist. LCM is currently giving its Subaru facility a \$1 million facelift.

The auto sales industry "has its highs and I lows," he said. "That's the car business."

But 2002 was a good year, according to Deibler. The success of Providence Chrysler Plymouth Dodge convinced LCM partners to buy the Wenger dealership.

Coincidentally, Samuel M. Wenger set up his repair shop at the Buck in 1935, the same year the Manns founded Lancaster County Motors.

Dick Wenger, 61, started working at the family Pontiac GMC franchise in 1961 and took over the business in 1974.

"It's a pop-and-mom dealership, a breed rapidly vanishing from the Lancaster County landscape," said Wenger, who ran the business with his wife, Kelli.

He said he'll work a few more weeks selling his used car inventory and then look forward to "a little golfing, a little traveling."

"Our son is in Florida," he added. "We don't have anyone to step into the business. Retirement seemed appropriate."

Wenger said his employees will stay on at Providence Pontiac GMC.

"We will miss the customers and the employees," he said. "Our business was built on the service aspect. Over the years, we've had quite a clientele, very faithful and loyal."

For Deibler, the Wenger "southern end" pedigree was an important selling point.

Deibler noted the showroom's location at routes 272 and 372 exposes it to heavy commuter traffic between Lancaster and York County and Maryland.

LCM loaner cars make it convenient for drive-throughs to drop off their vehicles for servicing, Deibler noted. The company is looking to increase the Wenger customer base, which Providence Pontiac GMC General Manager Brent E. Neff said primarily encompasses the 10 or 15 miles around the shop.

"We definitely want to expand that," said Neff, who intends to promote the dealership in Lancaster and "as far west and east as they'll allow me to advertise."

According to Deibler, the dealership will double the Wenger new car inventory to 20 vehicles "in the very near future" and also launch a fresh fleet of pre-owned automobiles.

Frank Nolt, a partner in the new dealership, noted that it acquired its first preowned vehicle, a 2001 PT Cruiser with 4,000 miles on it, last week.

"I think used cars are going to be a large part of our business. We're excited about the opportunity. There's tremendous growth potential down here."

"Eight employees were on duty at the dealership last week," Deibler said. "The company plans to add four or five more workers and will soon schedule a grand opening."

The new showroom Deibler and Nolt expect to build will be a standard "signature" facility designed by Pontiac GMC to promote its image.

Deibler said last week that he did not yet

know what the building will look like or cost.

But Neff promised that the LCM tradition of community involvement won't get lost in the transition. "We're sort of a down home company," said Neff, who added that the new dealership has already agreed to sponsor the local Lions Club.

The dealership also intends to get involved in local schools and the Solanco Fair, according to Deibler, a Quarryville resident who's especially delighted to be introducing another LCM outpost south of Lancaster.

"Customer satisfaction will remain high priority for LCM's new car lines," he said.

"Each brand has its loyalty. The Pontiac owners are very loyal to their brands."

Neff agreed.

"I talked to a guy yesterday who was on his fifth 'GMC Envoy.'"

Providence Pontiac GMC will sell GMC Yukon and Envoy trucks, according to Neff and Deibler.

Hot cars in the Pontiac line include the 2003 Vibe, a compact five-door sports wagon, and a blast-from-the-past road rod.

"Pontiac is reviving the GTO," Neff said. "It's going to be a very high-performance car reminiscent of the muscle cars of the '60s and '70s. Rear wheel drive. Big V-8. It's going to be a baby boomer thing."

Providence Pontiac GMC, a new franchise created by the merger of Wenger Pontiac and Lancaster County Motors, employs, from left, Craig Deibler, Frank Nolt and Brent Neff.

