

Women in Automotive: An Overlooked Secret to Success



Sandra Marchetti
SALES AND FINANCE
SPECIALIST

The statistics regarding women in the automotive industry tell an interesting story: Women buy or influence the purchase of 85 per cent of all cars and light trucks. Women are 52 per cent of licensed drivers, 56 per cent of college students and 47 per cent of the workforce.

However, across both the USA and Canada women hold fewer than 20 per cent of jobs in automotive retail and most of those jobs are administrative. And it gets worse. Women have a turnover rate of over 90 per cent in retail and most don't stay in the job for more than a year.

At first glance it may seem that the automotive industry is simply not cut out for women. But this is far too simplistic a view. As many GMs and dealer principals have experienced, women sell a heck of a lot of cars. In fact, in many situations they quickly rise to a top sales spot within a dealership. But getting women to take the job can be difficult and keeping them in the job can be an even greater challenge.

This problem – or 'disconnect' – is what inspired Women in Automotive, a US-based industry organization, to launch six years ago. Women in Automotive is missioned with elevating the entire automotive industry by elevating the role of women within it. Through conferences, events, seminars and community engagement, Women in Automotive champions the idea that women do belong in Automotive and the key is identifying and working to remove the obstacles that are hindering this progress.

On Dec. 15-16, 2019, Women in Automotive (WIA)

hosted its 2019 Winter Conference in Palm Springs, California, and I was pleased to represent Canada as one of the Conference attendees and panel speakers.

The main topic of the WIA Winter Conference was Empowerment: How women empower ourselves, how we support each other and how we position ourselves within the industry. Over the course of the two-day event, women from across the industry shared not only how they achieved their success, but also, how we can help other women to achieve theirs, and how we develop leaders for the future.

Some noteworthy presentations included: I Am Remarkable: Empowering women and other underrepresented groups to celebrate their achievements (Lissette Gole, Google); Finding Athena: Current Female Leadership and Developing our Female Leaders of the Future (Thomas Zarembo, director of Automotive, Google); Preparing Your Teams for the Future of Retailing (Candice Crane, Crane Automotive Resources); Work Life Balance: How to Excel in Your Career While Making It Home for Bedtime (Jill Ball, Jennifer Linder, ACV Auctions); Career and Personal Growth (Brooke Skinner Ricketts, director of marketing, Cars.com); Culture is Key: Inspiring a Women Friendly Culture in Your Workplace (Kerri Wise, TrueCar).

My participation was in a panel discussion entitled "Women Leading Women". Our panel was moderated by the incredible Eve Knudtsen from Knudtsen Chevrolet, a third-generation Dealer Principal who successfully operates the dealership first opened by her grandfather. My fellow panellists included 30+ year auto veterans Julie Kimes (O'Daniel Automotive Group) and Cherie Watters of O'Gara Coach Companies and the powerhouse General Manager Deanna Reynolds (Team Mazda/Team Kia, El Cajon). To say it was an honour to share the stage with these women is an understatement.

Be creative in your recruitment

Women often think they are not qualified to sell cars when, in fact, they may be perfect for the job. In your advertise-

ment use verbiage like "Customer Service" or "Customer Care" versus "Sales" and you'll see your number of woman candidates jump dramatically. Look for top performers in other industries such as retail and invite these women to visit your dealership. Panellist Deanna Reynolds was recruited by her dealer principal years ago while working as a commissioned salesperson at the clothing retailer Nordstrom and she is now GM to two thriving car dealerships. Be aware that women often have negative preconceptions about 'car sales' so be clever and work around this.

Promote from within

Your BDC department is likely filled with women who are skilled at engaging customers and overcoming objections: why aren't these women being considered for the sales floor? Many top car saleswomen began their careers in a support position. And administrative staff should be considered too. Fellow panellist Julie Kimes recruited her long-time receptionist to the sales floor two years ago; the receptionist's engaging personality and exceptional rapport with customers helped her become the top salesperson in the dealership for two years running.

Be flexible/creative and reap the rewards

Women are often scared away by a 100 per cent commission pay plan even when their income is likely to be far higher than what they are currently earning. Be creative: offer a guaranteed base income equal to their current pay for the first three to six months to provide enough time for a woman candidate to find their feet and grow into the sales position without fear of financial woes. As well, many women stay away from sales positions in car dealerships because of the fear of balancing family responsibilities. Use technology (home computers, mobile phones) to give salespeople that bit more of flexibility and reap the rewards of a more content and committed team member.

Look for career shifters

The majority of women in top automotive positions are industry veterans, coming from an Automotive family or having worked their way up over the course of 20+ years. But what about career shifters, meaning women coming new to the auto industry having developed a successful career elsewhere? This is the niche I was able to represent on my panel, having developed a strong set of sales and customer service skills over the past 25 years, however, being absolutely green to the world of cars when I joined CarNation only three years ago. My head of finance took a chance on me in 2016 (thanks Nick!) and by 2019 I managed to earn the role of top number of units sold in my department.

Overall, the WIA Winter Conference was interesting, empowering, and filled with inspiration on ways to bring more women into the world of Automotive. I am already looking forward to WIA's next conference which will be held in Orlando, Florida on June 14-16 where they expect to host 500+ women and men from across the USA and Canada **AW**

Sandra Marchetti, BA, MBA, Sandra is a senior manager at Georgetown Kia (part of the CarNation Group) where she specializes in non-prime financing and sales. A seasoned business professional, Sandra's experience spans over 25 years over a wide range of industries including investment banking, entrepreneurship, consulting and sales and marketing. Sandra has lived and worked around the world including Canada, the USA, Japan, France and England. Sandra holds her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto and her Master of Business Administration degree from the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California.

