

60 years – and counting – of selling Buicks

By Chuck Green
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As he marks his 60th anniversary selling Buicks, it's reasonable to assume that Bob Travis has a knack for closing deals. At the same time, he seems to be nowhere near closing out his career.

Pedal to the metal, all the way. "I've always liked cars and have always been around them; they're my life," said Travis, 81, who's been with Suburban Buick in Wheaton since 1947. He started in the body shop and made his way around the dealership, including the parts department.

But he soon found the ideal role when a position became available in sales. "I was fixing up cars when [the owner] asked me if I wanted to try selling them. I said I'd give it a try. If it works, fine," said Travis, who's from Wheaton and has lived in St. Charles for years.

It took Travis only about a month to sell his first car, a used Cadillac. "It came naturally, and I liked what I was doing. I suppose that's half the battle. I sold quite a few used cars."

He's been sold on cars since he was 15 and owned his first, a 1934 Ford. "I tinkered with it like a kid that age would," noted Travis.

Still, for all his success hawking vehicles, Travis, who now works two or three days a week, downplays his longevity.

More than anything, he noted, it's a matter of desire. "I just stuck

with it, that's all, and I worked for good people."

Kim Bushy, who took over the presidency of the dealership from her late husband, Gabor, is similarly impressed with Travis. "He's a great guy; a class act. I don't think there's anyone who knows more about the car business. It's his life."

She added that Travis, who worked for her husband for 33 years, has a way with customers.

Of course, that's not surprising, considering he's been dealing with generations of families in the Wheaton/Glen Ellyn area for 60 years.

"He treats people the way he'd want to be treated; he's honest and straightforward, and he doesn't pressure people," she said.

In fact, if anything, she noted, he encourages them to put the brakes on a purchase until they're sure they're ready. "He tries to understand someone's needs. He's one of those guys who will tell someone who's upside down on a car [owes more on their trade-in than it's worth], 'why don't you just wait until you get things turned around and then come and see me? It doesn't make any sense for you to buy this car right now.' I think people appreciate that honesty."

People also appreciate his dedication, whether to the Navy from 1943-46 or his wife, Peggy, to whom he has been married 57 years. "It hasn't been easy; I'll tell you," he said, laughing.



Photo for the Tribune by David Banks
Bob Travis, 81, started at Suburban Buick in Wheaton in 1947, working his way up to salesman from an initial job in the body shop.

One thing that did come relatively easy was his decision not to pursue other careers.

"I've always been pretty satisfied selling cars and made a decent living," said Travis. "Sometimes you think maybe you're better off doing something else, but then again, if you know what you're doing, sometimes you're better off sticking with that."

By the same token, noted Travis, the automobile industry hasn't stuck to what it used to be. "It's a different world in the car business today, what with selling on the Internet."

He said, by and large, those in the market for a car are much more educated than they used to be—and it shows on the bottom line.

"Everything is wide open as far as pricing, for instance. People shop more and get more information on the Internet. They pretty much know what they want when they come in." And know what it costs.

While he said Buick owners are loyal, repeat customers, Travis also acknowledges cars sales is a tougher row to hoe.

"The industry isn't as good as it used to be. But nothing is right

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Kim Bushy, Suburban Buick president

now. You just have to roll with the market."

The numbers tell the story. U.S. auto sales totaled 16.15 million in 2007, 407,000 fewer than in 2006 and 1.25 million off the record 17.4 million in 2000.

To stay ahead of the curve, "you have to stay up on a product and know what you're talking about." So Travis is one of the dealer's six salesmen to attend quarterly computer classes, conducted on-site. "Our salesmen go through training to ensure they're constantly made aware of any changes in upcoming vehicles as well as their performance," Bushy said.

Otherwise, Travis said, there's no point coming into work.

And not coming to work is no option for someone as competitive as Travis.

"We have to be or we wouldn't be in business."

Travis isn't all business, though. He likes working in the garden of his home, on about one acre. "I used to play golf, but developed bursitis in my shoulder."

It could be a reason that he even toyed with the idea of moving to Florida, but decided against, well, kicking the tires in another state.

After all, he's owned only two homes in his lifetime and plans to keep it that way.

Figures.