

WORKING TOGETHER

When it comes to taking care of business owners, GM piles on the love.

It's been a long two years, but the traffic is finally moving again in automobile and truck showrooms. According to manufacturer reports, some of the heaviest movement is from business owners looking to update their aging lineups with new, more efficient vehicles just entering the product pipeline.

Small-business owners are the unsung sweethearts of the automotive business, so manufacturers do all they can to ensure customer loyalty. General Motors has gone so far as to develop a network of dealerships called Business Central, geared toward providing loads of TLC to busy small-business owners.

Business Central dealerships don't quite compare with the swank "lifestyle" showrooms developed by Euro sports-car brands, in which espresso is doled out in monogrammed cups. But at the 450 Business Central dealerships across the country, customers do get a kind of mind-easing, one-stop-shopping experience. Whether the customer is hauling concrete blocks or delivering medical test tubes, the Business Central dealer has the connections to get the correct vehicle outfitted precisely for the job.

Sometimes the custom vehicle requests can get extreme. When a railroad maintenance company asked Joe Basil Chevrolet in Buffalo, to come up with a truck they could drive down the railroad tracks, they went about creating it.

"The real advantage, when a small-business owner goes to a Business Central dealership," says Brian Bowden, GM's director of commercial vehicle operations, "is that we have trained personnel who are solely focused on work trucks and vans. They understand the needs of the small-business owner and are able to help them configure or upfit a ve-



hicle to make it ready for work."

Getting to be a Business Central dealership is not just a matter of hanging up a sign. "This is full-blown," says Jim Basil at Joe Basil Chevrolet. "When we

took it on we were required to go to commercial colleges for two years." The education process continues from management down to the showroom floor, where salespeople must have six months of training—six times more than a typical car salesperson. Taking into account the added inventory requirements and special shop equipment, not to mention the demands of the average fleet owner, Basil believes that only totally committed dealers can do it. "You have to be in it 100%, or don't be in," he says.

"And if you don't have service in the back," says Basil, "you'll sell them one truck and never see them again. If a guy's delivery truck is down, he's not making any money."

The hot new commercial vehicles right now are the Chevy Equinox and GMC Terrain, small crossovers that get surprisingly good mileage (22 city/32 highway) for haulers. The more spacious crossover SUVs, the GMC Acadia and Chevy Traverse, each with more than six feet of floor space in back, have also been moving, as has been the versatile Chevy HHR.

Business owners are concerned with operating costs, and value factors beyond excellent fuel mileage, of course. According to the auto analysis firm Vincentric, resale can account for a major chunk of change, and GM vehicles deliver on that front. GM's five-year, 100,000-mile warranty and OnStar system, which can be used for everything from navigation to receiving monthly maintenance information, have proven to be tangible assets to business owners. ●