

Redefining “Leadership”

From Delmarva’s Only Century-Old Automotive Dealership

By Hal Alpiar, MBA



Leading i.g. Burton Milford into the future are (right to left) president Charles Burton, director of operations Peter Renzi, general sales manager Peter Palmer, director of sales M. J. Lofland and director of service George Schifferer.

It's a rarity these days to find businesses of any kind, least of all an automotive dealer, taking a leadership posture in the marketplace. Yet 101-year-old i.g. Burton and Company, Milford and Seaford, Delaware, is doing just that. In the middle of constructing an elaborate one-of-a-kind building and faced with radically reduced consumer spending, loss of consumer confidence triggered by wildly fluctuating fuel prices and automaker industry bailouts, some hard “take-the-high-road-or-take-the-low-road” decisions had to be made.

i.g. Burton and Company opted for the high road. With the support of loyal customers, employees and bankers willing to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, plus some sales and service consolidation efforts, the dealership took steps to actually increase its already proactive role in the Delmarva community.

“We figured the reason we've been around so long is that we've always honored our mission to treat everyone with honesty and integrity, and provide value to our customers—whether that means giving the best service and sales

deals or stepping up fundraising efforts for charities hit with tougher-than-usual times,” said president Charles Burton.

Dealership employees just raised \$25,458.80 for United Way and more than \$6,000 for Susan G. Komen for the Cure Breast Cancer Research. The company also donates and provides support to other deserving organizations such as the Delaware Guidance Services for Youth and Their Families, Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Delaware, the Delaware Children's Museum, and others.

Two looks for one building—BMW's ultramodern versus Mercedes' Autohaus.



OVER A LIFETIME, ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER

A recent State-of-the-Building report from i.g. Burton, III



Above: While related, the Mercedes and BMW sides of the new Milford dealership have distinct personalities

"This building has taken six years, start to finish. Besides being more of a project than any of us could have imagined, it had its high spots. Early on, we realized we would need an additional property line setback of just a few additional feet that spilled onto the wetlands border of a cornfield behind the land we owned.

"Granddaddy (who was 90 at the time) and I, made our way to the distant farmhouse, knocked on the door and were

greeted by the 93-year-old landowner who invited us in. We explained the situation and Granddaddy asked the farmer if we could purchase the bordering strip of land to satisfy our construction requirements.

"The man said, 'Nope! Won't sell it to you, but I'll give it to you for free. Lets' go straight to the deeds office and I'll sign it over.' Granddaddy and I were thrilled, but puzzled. 'Why,' Granddaddy asked, 'would you give us that piece of

land when we're willing to pay for it?'

"The response floored us. 'Well,' said the farmer, 'when I first came this way in 1948, it was poor times and all I had was a crop of corn with no way to move it. I came to you and asked if you had a truck I could rent, and you said to take the one that was parked out front and not to worry about paying for it 'til after the corn got sold. I remember that,' the farmer said, smiling." **D**

"We don't pretend to be perfect or have all the answers for other businesses," says Charles Burton. "We simply go out there every day and treat our customers the way we treat friends and family."

i.g. Burton has actually accelerated its leadership training program facilitated by Dan Beck of Maritz, Inc. In addition to hosting management team sessions, Beck also runs customer service classes in i.g. Burton showrooms, sometimes actually pulling in customers and shoppers to gain on-the-spot feedback about what customers really want versus what employees might think they want.

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i.g. Burton from page 11.

out there every day and treat our customers the way we treat friends and family. We're invested in our employees and in doing what we can to help meet some of Delmarva's needs. If you want to call that 'leadership,' go ahead. We're just doing what we feel we have to do and we're doing it the best that we can."

i.g. Burton's Milford locations, just north of the Routes 1 and 113 intersection and overpass, include the Chevrolet "store," the Chrysler/Dodge/Jeep store, and the new BMW and Mercedes customer sales and service center that's scheduled for a public-invited grand opening on March 19th. The catered March 19th grand opening will provide Delmarva residents and business people with a walk-through opportunity to see the results of some truly unique Delmarva business leadership that involved years of planning, mediating and reconciliation.

The combined new BMW and Mercedes building is uniquely state-of-the-art. The two competing German manufacturers had totally opposite thinking about how each wanted their side of the all-under-one-roof facility to look. And there's no direct access from one showroom to the other. Every single inch of space—from outside curb heights to inside Parts Department storage arrangements—has been dictated by each company's competing interests, competing designers and competing architects.

The Mercedes exterior, for example, includes a drive-in service ramp and building frontage marked by their signature dark blue exterior columns and cross beams with circular openings. Inside, visitors stand gaping at the apricot, silver and dark blue Mercedes "Autohaus" design, an open factory/warehouse look that features exposed ceiling ductwork; no enclosed offices; specialized carpeting, counters and lighting; and custom-made German floor tiles.

The exterior for the BMW side of the building emphasizes BMW's signature opposite-angled leaning columns and seamless glass

frontage. The space-age-looking interior is anchored by a seamless sealed ceiling with recessed lighting, the manufacturer's trademark white/silver/chrome finishing scheme, partly enclosed offices, and a special wood floor that "floats" amid their own imported custom floor tiles, all uniquely BMW.

Both Mercedes-Benz and BMW service facilities' styling is focused on open space. However, where Mercedes has no enclosed offices, BMW insists on three-wall consultation areas. When Mercedes learned that BMW had built-in customer vehicle servicing observation windows, they countered with a closed-circuit TV arrangement.

The 23-bay service areas are divided by different colored wall paint and floor tiling. But thousands of feet of specialized "cat 6" fiber optic cables offer some uniformity by connecting with each bay. And each bay sports its own highly-specialized custom blue toolbox. All service bays have in-ground lifts to prevent door "dings." Overhead hose lines minimize waste and allow new oil to be pumped directly to each bay. And used oil is recycled by removing it from customer vehicles, processing it on site, and reconstituting it into heating fuel used to heat the entire shop.

The BMW fiber optic cables facilitate an Integrated Service Information System (ISIS) which transmits diagnostic, servicing and repair computer signals back and forth to BMW headquarters in Germany. Mercedes uses a com-

parable but different system that also transmits transatlantic with Mercedes-Benz headquarters.

The BMW vehicles communicate via ISIS to all BMW service centers within the area that an owner is driving. Mercedes-Benz vehicles communicate directly from owner ignition keys. Information transmitted identifies such data as the owner's name; the number of miles away the vehicle is from a given dealership service center; and what correction, adjustment, repair or servicing work needed to be done on the vehicle. Then it and feeds the diagnostic information loop from nearby dealers to Germany and back again, so the owner needs only to drive to or contact the closest dealer for immediate servicing.

Who knows? One of these days, your car may even serve you bratwurst and mustard while it gives you a haircut and checks your emails as it's having its oil changed.

As to the rest of the company's facilities, i.g. Burton's Seaford Chevrolet dealership is one hundred yards south of Route 20, on Route 13. The company's Milford bus, truck, and collision center on Rehoboth Boulevard boasts the oldest Blue-Bird Bus dealership in the world!

*You can visit the author, a national book award-winner, at www.TheWriterWorks.com, or his daily blog for business owners, managers and entrepreneurs www.halalpiar.com. **D***