

Women in the Auto Industry

Vorderman Volkswagen forges ahead with “The Uncommon Experience” in the automotive industry by empowering the “untapped potential” of women.

Customers walking into Vorderman Volkswagen are met with this “uncommon experience” as they are greeted by saleswomen selling cars alongside male colleagues.

“There’s no longer a need to wheel and deal, and the stigma of the sneaky salesperson has gone by the wayside. The women on our team provide a personalized and friendly experience that keeps customers coming back again and again,” said Mike Brookfield, General Manager.

Lori Miller, Sales Manager, believes women, through compassion and gentler communication, are necessary in bringing balance to the “cut-and-dry method” of male salespersons.

“I think the way a woman presents is we have softer sides, and sometimes we can get the same point across as a male but not be as pushy while doing it. Customers’ ears open up when you do it that way,” said Miller, 51.

Though there are still skeptics out there, Miller said only about 15 percent of customers who see saleswomen in this traditionally male role are resistant at first.

“There are men out there who still feel that this is not a place for a woman, so they will shut you down,” said Miller.

Vorderman Volkswagen opened for business in 1990 and is co-owned by Reg and Connie Vorderman. Following Connie’s lead, the company began looking to women to reshape the way they did business.

It began to transform from a typical car dealership, to a family-friendly business with customers of all ages and genders at ease and comfortable coming through their doors.

Miller said, “You’re welcomed by 85 percent of your customers, as a female, because they seem to feel like they can trust a woman more.”

Over the years, the company has begun pushing into new territory as it welcomed more women to their team and stated they became “laser focused on empowering women.”

Vorderman Volkswagen’s commitment to investing in women is leading the way and changing how people view and do car sales.

“It’s transitioned, but what’s also happened too is the internet has come alive, and people are shopping online,” said Miller.

With an internet sales team made up of women, she said that nearly 80 percent of customers spend time online before walking through the doors at Vorderman Volkswagen.

“They can see, if they look at our stats, that we’ve got a lot of women; if they inquire online, they get a response from a woman, and I think it opens them up to the possibility,” said Miller.

Miller said, “I think [customers] just feel like a woman’s going to be more friendly.”

When Miller began working at Vorderman Volkswagen 11 years ago, there was one female employee on the sales floor.

Vorderman Volkswagen’s staff of over 50 is now comprised of 14 women, 7 of whom have roles in management and sales.

Though women have begun to thrive in previously traditionally male roles and businesses, the company continues to be an outlier in the auto industry.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that women accounted for roughly 21 percent of the country’s auto dealers in 2020. Though that may seem a reasonable number, it has barely evolved in the past 16 years.

Though much of the data is unclear with specific roles, it is evident that women continue to be overall absent from the forefront positions of the automotive business.

In the same data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women made up nearly 17 percent of workers in the auto repair, parts, and tire shops in 2020.

Resistance from men and traditional gender roles are not the only factors keeping women from joining the industry.

“They’re afraid they’re not going to be taken seriously, or someone’s going to walk in and say they don’t want to work with a woman,” said Miller. “But to be honest, we have the opposite. We have people who come in here and say they’d like to work with a female,” she said.

Wielding compassion, for Miller, is an even greater necessity in the pandemic.

“How many people are going through tough things? How many people have lost somebody in the last two-and-a-half years? How many people feel their life is totally different, because they can’t do the things they used to? Women bring compassion to things right now. People need that,” she said.

As Vorderman Volkswagen invited in more women, it has changed the culture and atmosphere at the dealership.

"It's an easygoing and family friendly atmosphere, I just can't explain it. When I walked through the doors on the day that I came in for an interview, it instantly hit me, like, 'Wow, this is home,'" said Caril Bernard, Assistant Sales Manager.

Bernard, 56, joined the team in 2014.

"A lot of people didn't realize I was in sales, because they were like, 'A saleswoman?' It was a little intimidating at first," said Bernard. Adding that "I think at first, men look down at you."

For both Miller and Bernard, they see softness as key to influencing the way sales are done.

"With a woman, we try to get to know the person first rather than sell them the vehicle," said Bernard. "You are able to put down their defenses right off the bat."

The compassion both women spoke of is aimed at approaching customers with humanness and authenticity, which both said makes customers feel comfortable and safe.

"It's changing, things are changing," said Bernard. "We've had a lot of people tell us that we treat them with respect and treat them nicer."

This empowerment of women to be fully and equally part of the team has proven successful. The company grew from a sales average of 50 cars sold per month to over 150.

Bernard said, "A lot of people come in because they've gone to other dealerships, and we're not harassing them. It's a softer approach."

Vorderman Volkswagen shows that women are as capable as male counterparts to be in the automotive industry and bring a key element that is lacking where women are absent.

Miller said, "You add a woman to it, you show some compassion, and it tends to change people."