

Leadership

SALES / MARKETING / SERVICE

The last year has been an exciting one for Acura. Not only did the brand release the all-new record-breaking RDX, it was also at the center of an ambitious restructuring that brought American Honda Motor Co., Inc., back to its roots.

In these three exclusive interviews, the new leaders in sales, marketing and service share their perspectives and their priorities for the brand.



STEVEN CENTER

TITLE: Vice President, Sales, American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

JOINED: 1993

PREVIOUS POSITIONS HELD:

VP, Acura Sales (209,000 record holder); VP, Marketing Operations; VP, Product Regulatory Office; VP, Connected & Environmental Business Development Office

CURRENT ROLE: Oversees auto sales across Acura and Honda

SALES

The Way Forward

With a new structure, Acura positions itself for the future. Sales leaders Steven Center and Mamadou Diallo explain how.

Steve, what's your take on the recent restructuring of Acura and Honda? Why has the company decided to create a division dedicated exclusively to sales?

Steven Center: We're going back to basics. It's organized now the way it was when I arrived here 26 years ago. The market is getting tougher. Everything is much more complicated. We set up the structure so our focus is crystal clear.

How will the new setup help drive sales?

SC: Before, some senior executives had multiple responsibilities. For example, you had some executives responsible for both sales and marketing. Now, in my role, I get to focus on just sales. Mamadou and I are going to live or die by the numbers every day. No distractions.

Mamadou, what do the changes mean for Acura specifically?

Mamadou Diallo: Acura came out of the reorganization in a much better position. You have Steve returning to the brand. He's an Acura guy. He was leading the sales effort when we sold 200,000-plus units. You have Jon Ikeda as the Acura brand officer in a unique position to drive the overall brand. You have James Keller, now president of research and development, who was previously vice president of the Acura Business Planning Office. He's another Acura guy. We are all over the place in key positions. Acura has been reinforced.

Steve, as Mamadou mentioned, your new position represents a homecoming not only to Acura, but also to Precision Crafted Performance. Can you speak about how the brand's past will influence its future?

SC: Acura is returning to its roots. We're emphasizing performance and we're not being distracted by what anybody else is doing. This reset really occurred when Jon Ikeda arrived. He has a deep passion for Acura and brought back Precision Crafted Performance. Now, Acura has its own space. It's a true brand. The work that Jon has done over the past four years has really positioned us to take it to the next level.

Mamadou, as part of your role as senior manager of Acura sales, you head up the sales field force. Is a strong field-dealer relationship the key to dealer profitability?

MD: I know this sounds a little bit clichéd, but the brand's success is really all about the partnership that we have with our dealers. They know we really care. That opens up an honest dialogue about the things that are working and the things that aren't. We may have various positions on one single issue, but we all work together to find common ground.

Is that kind of relationship rare in the automotive industry?

SC: It's very rare. We see the dealers as our first-in-line clients and our business partners.



We're like a band of brothers at this point. We've been through the battles together. They haven't given up. We haven't given up. We've got a clear plan to get back to where we started and then forge ahead.

It seems as though that strategy is paying off. Sales were up 2.8 percent in 2018 during what was a down year for the premium car market in general. What is Acura doing that other brands are not?

SC: Certainly product is a big part of our success. Look at the new RDX; it's a bull's-eye. But we're also setting a new standard in how we relate to our clients. We recently acquired the sponsorship of the Grand Prix of Long Beach. We have a long-standing relationship with the Sundance Film Festival. We also have a relationship with the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. These are things our clients enjoy. We're making an emotional connection between our brand and our clients.

You mentioned the new Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach. Why was that an important race for Acura to sponsor?

SC: A couple of reasons. It's a marquee event. It's also in our backyard. Acura was born right here in Torrance, Calif., and Long Beach is a stone's throw from

here. Racing is part of this company's DNA. Before we even built anything with four wheels, we were racing.

How does racing support sales?

MD: I think it goes back to our emphasis on Precision Crafted Performance.

This is an opportunity to showcase our brand's performance and gain in consideration. In the case of Long Beach, the local DAA was heavily involved; one of our racing cars had their decals. The dealers saw this as an event that would raise awareness about Acura in the marketplace.



MAMADOU DIALLO

TITLE: Senior Manager, Acura National Sales, Incentives and Strategy

JOINED: 2001

PREVIOUS POSITIONS HELD: Acura Zone Manager, Midwest; Assistant Zone Manager, Southwest; Assistant Manager, National Market Planning; Assistant Manager, Sales Training

CURRENT ROLE: Responsible for Acura sales

SC: Dealers also need to engage with their communities. We can't be everywhere all the time. If we're setting the example with racing, they need to get involved in their communities.

Acura has invested heavily in developing exciting vehicles, like the all-new RDX and the revamped ILX. What are the most important actions dealers can take to leverage the refreshed lineup?

MD: The RDX has been very successful since its launch, setting new sales records every month. We're seeing the type of clients in that segment we haven't seen before. We are conquering clients from other premium brands. Dealers have the opportunity to go on offense because they truly have the best car in the segment.

The ILX presents a unique opportunity for us. We repositioned this vehicle in terms of pricing. The price point now allows dealers to compete with even the mass brands. We want this vehicle to be a gateway to the brand. I think that dealers would be well served to market this vehicle with a different view—one that takes aim at millennials. They are critical to this brand's moving forward, and this vehicle puts us in a position where they can start to experience Acura.

Steve, how will you and Jon Ikeda work together to lead the brand into its next phase of development?

SC: Jon's got his hands on the steering wheel, and I have my foot on the throttle. That's a good way to look at us. He's steering Acura in his role as Acura brand officer, and I'm managing the business. We have one conjoined brain! [Laughs]

Are your offices close together?

SC: We're all squeezed in here on the third floor of Acura global headquarters, and Jon is just a few steps away.

MD: Regardless of office locations, we are a cohesive team. We each have our own views, but ultimately, in terms of where we want to be, we are very aligned. The future is bright for Acura. ⚙️