

# Dealership Tours Start Here

By Steve Finlay

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MIDLAND, MI – Deflecting bad news about lousy auto sales of late, Ryan LaFontaine invokes a remark by his mother, Maureen LaFontaine, a dealership veteran.

“Until we see people walking in the streets and highways, the car business will be OK,” she told him.

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He shares that during a presentation to students, faculty and others at Northwood University here. He was there for the school’s 46th annual auto show, billed as the world’s largest event of its kind.

LaFontaine, who graduated from Northwood’s automotive program 10 years ago, is general manager of his family’s LaFontaine Buick, Pontiac, GMC and Cadillac dealership in Highland, MI, a small town about 30 miles (48 km) north of Detroit.

The new \$15 million facility is notable because of its upscale amenities – such as a restaurant and a manicure station – and \$2 million in green technology, earning the dealership environmental honors and lots of attention.

Being located outside metro Detroit’s population center, “we had to give people a reason to come to Highland,” LaFontaine says of one reason for building such a stand-out facility.

The dealership has been a big draw – and not just among car shoppers. It regularly hosts tours consisting of people of all ages, including a Northwood group recently.

All dealership employees are trained to conduct tours, which take about an hour to show everything, especially the green features such as geo-thermal heating and cooling units and a solar-tube lighting system.

“It gets people talking about the car business and seeing that things aren’t that bad,” LaFontaine says. “The business is there. We just have to think outside the box and get people in our showrooms.”

He’s keen on customer satisfaction. A manifestation of that is that his accessibility his office is right off the customer waiting room, rather than in a remote spot of the dealership. It gives him easy access to visitors.

“We live and breathe customer satisfaction every day,” LaFontaine says. “We haven’t taken some of the hits other dealers have.”

Some setbacks have occurred though. General Motors Co. ending the Pontiac brand is one of them, he says. “But now I’m looking at how I can make Cadillac stronger for us.”



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