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Do You Have What It Takes?

Faith in the future and preparation for the future are a powerful combination, and it's a combination that G&A Marketing has bonded into its business DNA. As an organization that prides itself on going against the grain of conventional wisdom, the company is preparing for a massive expansion, as the industry recovers, to position itself as the premiere automotive staffed event, advertising, training and consulting company. Susan Givens, publisher of AutoSuccess, recently sat down with the company's president, Pat Gunning, to discuss this strategy, and how the company plans on helping dealerships now and in the future.

AutoSuccess: Pat, what is driving this need for you to hire?

Pat Gunning: In times when most companies are trying to cut costs and personnel, we are doing something very different. After years of competitors trying to duplicate our business models, many have recognized there is a lot more to it than what appears at first glance. A lot of guys who tried to compete with us were used car managers, general sales managers and general managers who had no advertising background, and lacked experience being on the road in the promotions business. Unfortunately, they made a lot of mistakes at the dealers' expense, and gave many dealers a bad taste of the staffed event industry.

Look at it this way: We can all play golf, but very few make it to the PGA Tour. Why is that? A lot of it comes down to dedication, commitment, practice, mental toughness and great coaches. Working for us is a lot like being that player who makes it to the Tour. Strong hiring, training and accountability practices seem to be what dealers want when it comes to staffed events. Demand for promotions has increased, thanks largely to dealer recommendations regarding the quality of our teams. In fact, we have been contacted by two other staffed event companies who were so impressed with our team training and accountability that they wanted to sell our teams.

Even those dealers whom are strictly Internet-focused have discovered the power of staffed events. The Internet is an invisible transaction. Dealers didn't build multi-million dollar show rooms to have lengthy phone conversations. Where you close business is on the showroom floor. And in order to close business on the showroom floor, you need to get people in your dealership. This is where promotional marketing comes into play.

The success of our business model has helped dealers dominate their market and created a need for us to seek additional help.

AS: So what do you suggest dealers do to dominate their market?

PG: Do what your competition is not — pursue well-rounded, systematic marketing plans. Over the last couple years we've talked to a lot of dealers, and have noticed an alarming trend. If you look back three years ago, every dealer in an average market was advertising via direct mail, TV, radio, etc. These days, everyone is focused on advertising through the Internet, making the Internet a rather saturated space. Just because advertising options like direct mail have been around for awhile doesn't mean they don't work. We are one of the few companies that still offer a performance guarantee, which requires us to track our advertising and stay on top of trends. Believe it or not,

TV, radio and direct mail can be highly effective in today's market, if used properly.

Every consumer is different and responds to different advertising in different ways. Compare the grosses of customers who buy off the Internet against those who buy off of other forms of advertising. A lot of the dealers I talk to tell me that the Internet customer is highly educated and price driven, which produces only half the gross. In response, we created Inventory Blaster, which takes average online ads and makes them promotions, without using the price of the car. Combine this Internet tool with the right direct marketing materials, and you'll have a well-diverse plan that's hard to beat.

AS: Sounds like your business strategy relies heavily on being different. How has this recently affected your business and your people?

PG: Dealers tell us of their struggles to overcome decreased grosses and drops in floor traffic, much of which is attributed to the high focus on Internet advertising. Now we're seeing dealers jump back into the promotions business because of the positive cash flow and energy it creates in the showroom.

To fill this steadily growing number of orders, we need to recruit now. Our hiring process is slow to ensure we accept only candidates of solid talent and character. Our training process is long and intense to weed out those who can't cut it. This is a big separator between us and other companies. There's more to it than just hiring a car guy and sending him off to a store, telling him to "make it happen." To us, "hope" is not a strategy. We don't just hire car guys; we take talented people and teach them our system and management style so they can learn quickly, without making unnecessary mistakes at dealerships.

AS: What positions are you looking to fill?

PG: We are looking for strong desk managers, closers, F&I professionals, top-ranked sales representatives and national account executives that call on dealers.

AS: How do you develop your people to be successful?

PG: A lot of car guys don't think they need any more training. In fact, we have to pass on a lot of candidates because they aren't willing to go through our training program. It may be hard to believe, but we're OK with that. If the candidate doesn't want to take part in our training, then they don't fit within our system. We are a lot like the New England Patriots in this way. We've learned that these types of people tend to create a lot of issues down the road. There are a lot of car guys who don't like to be held accountable to a higher standard.

Those who do take part in our training process understand its importance. New team members spend weeks in assessment training, designed to evaluate skills and character prior to officially becoming a part of our family. Once accepted into the flock, team members are required to participate in quarterly round-table training to discuss common challenges and introduce new management and sales techniques. All of this regulated training acts as preparation for a nationwide team convention held yearly in Cincinnati, Ohio. This

convention allows teams to share experiences with their peers, further developing themselves both professionally and personally. This cycle then continues for each year of a team member's employment.

Improving our people has been key in the results we have been able to provide for our clients. As other companies are finding it harder and harder to have good sales, we have increased our average sale by 43 percent — all because we work a system.

AS: Describe some of the processes you have to motivate and develop your staff.

PG: Monday mornings are reserved for intricate sales training geared to the needs of staffed event account executives. Techniques from the Sandler Sales Institute, The NTR Group and Stephen Covey are regular topics up for discussion at these Monday morning meetings. Motivational training programs such as those by Tony Robbins are attended by all — from the president to the receptionist.

The skills taught here go beyond basic classroom training to involve strategic goal setting and achievement plans. These plans require each employee to regularly write down goals, address aspects of performance that need improvement, and apply new communication techniques to their daily lives. All of these actions combine to create a program that nurtures success amongst its employees.

AS: Tell us about your "Rules."

PG: Our employees live by a list of more than 180 rules focused on sales and management best-practices. These rules act as guidelines for each employee to teach them different ways to think about and handle issues. When faced with difficult circumstances or tough decisions, these rules help to define the issue and keep employees charging forward. Each rule is regularly reviewed as a part of various training programs. Copies of specific rules are displayed on the walls of each account executive's office and are shared with each team as reminders to apply the principle to a solution. Presenting guidelines in this manner helps each employee become better equipped to proactively handle situations. This style of training develops people to a higher standard.

AS: How has this training and preparation allowed your company to adapt to the changing needs of your clients and the marketplace?

PG: While staffed events are the core of our business plan, our people have been able to create additional services to help our clients grow. As time and dealer needs progressed, the talents of our employees have allowed us to adapt and increase the services we are able to provide. We now offer a variety of themed staffed events, direct mail advertising, Internet promotions, RV programs and a fully automated inventory posting solution. We have repeatedly reinvented ourselves in response to growing demand. Our offerings grew out of need. Some were created as a result of our absorption of various event providers, while others were built from direct requests from the dealer.

By creating new business opportunities in response to demand, we are now the one in need. We need to add talent to support our expanding business divisions. No doubt about it: These new positions are a key

piece to our aggressive growth commitment, and require the attention of only the most notable candidates.

AS: What will it take for people to join your team?

PG: Before one can get to training, he or she must meet a very detailed list of hiring criteria, which includes drug testing, background checks, a signed code of ethics and more. Our hiring process is lengthy, to weed out the good from the bad. We don't cut corners. This process is just as important to our client's well-being as it is to ours. Our rigorous hiring qualifications and training programs will appeal to only an elite few.

Think of it this way: What type of person strives to be a Green Beret? One who is driven, focused, committed and professional; or an individual who is non-committal, unfocused, unaccountable and lacking the desire to be all they can be?

AS: Pursuing such an aggressive growth plan in the face of a recession seems a bit risky.

PG: This company is no stranger to conquering concerns. Fifteen years in the business has given us many opportunities to learn right from wrong. We've taken our share of risks and have experienced both success and set backs as a result.

Experience has formed the foundation on which successful events are built. It can be scary for a dealer to try something new in an economy like this. We understand that fear. We've been there. But our history has proven to us what really works and what doesn't. This "no fear" mentality has proven to be a large contributor to our steady and rapid growth. While not every dealer may be enticed by hard results, there are an increasing number of dealers who've come to rely on our products and services.

Still think you've got what it takes to be a part of G&A Marketing's all star squad? They may be searching for you. Send your resume to Matt Baker, VP of G&A Marketing at mbaker@autosuccessonline.com for consideration.

Thinking of hiring additional personnel for your dealership or business in the coming months? G&A has a few free tips that will help you fill your positions with quality talent. To request a copy of *Nine Necessary Rules for Hiring and Retaining the Industry's Best*, e-mail Matt Baker at the address above, with the subject line "RULES."

For more information about G&A Marketing or president Pat Gunning, contact him at 866.880.3564, or by e-mail at pgunning@autosuccessonline.com.



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