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BUSINESS

Quite a different motor dealer

Auto/motorcycle seller doesn't have a car lot but still lures buyers

By Dan Sorenson

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Tucson, Arizona | Published: 10.23.2009

In a city dotted with acres of vacant used-car lots, weeds sprouting up through the pavement cracks and sun-faded plastic pennants blowing in the wind, Vail Motors is a breath of weird air.

About half of Vail Motors "motors" are motorcycles.

Roughly half its business is from out of town, much of it from out of the state, driven from Vail Motors' Web site, www.vailmotors.com.

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And, strangest of all, the company doesn't have a car lot.

Vail Motors operates out of an innocuous storefront at 3680 S. Park Ave., just south of Interstate 10. There's enough room out front for one vehicle wedged between the sidewalk and the front wall of the building. Right now it's a bright blue 2002 Saturn SL1 sedan that looks like it just rolled off the assembly line. It's the oldest vehicle in Vail's current inventory.

The showroom is a cavernous garage behind the storefront.

"My philosophy is the dealerships don't do as much as they can to make late model used cars as close to new as possible. Dirty engine, door dings. Who wants to buy something like that?" asks Brian Schultz, the 31-year-old co-owner of Vail Motors Inc. with wife Carrie Weniger, also 31.

Schultz is a former corporate pilot, Weniger a project coordinator at Raytheon.

Vail Motors started as a sideline, with Schultz going full-time first, and Weniger just recently making the leap.

"We didn't sell a car 'til May three years ago. We've sold about 311 vehicles in the last three years."

It's a little like eBay, but local and with a seller you can meet and a vehicle you can kick the tires on.

"We're more of a virtual showroom. If it looks like it does online," Schultz says, the virtual showroom visitor becomes a real customer when they see the vehicle in person.

An official of the state association for used-car dealers said Vail Motors' on-and-off-line business model is not unusual these days.

"There's a lot of our research that shows that (dealers') marketing is transitioning to the Internet," said Charity Crawford, executive director of the Phoenix-based Arizona Independent Automobile Dealers Association.

"It's not online sales — it's online marketing, which initiates a sale. ... It's very much a new world out there, in the way people are finding their new car — it's not a drive-by world any more."

Crawford said Schultz and Weniger are association members who have done their homework, attending the group's classes on regulatory compliance.

To Schultz, it's a model that make sense for his business and its customers.

He says "it's just not that hard" to clean up a car, get it running perfectly, make everything work the way it's supposed to — and make a thousand dollars on the deal.

Vail often sends the cars out to a dealership for repairs and to bring the maintenance up to date, another stop for painless door-ding repairs, then bring them back to the garage/showroom for a meticulous detailing to make them pretty before putting their shiny pictures up on Vail Motors' Web site.

Most of the cars and motorcycles don't need much work. Many are only one or two years old, unusual for an independent used-car dealer.

That's particularly true of the bikes, some are "repos" and usually only a year or 2 old — some having never left the dealer's lot.

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Detailer Jake Barrera cleans up a motorcycle at Vail Motors, where the emphasis is on shiny, top-notch vehicles.

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Schultz says there are a lot of stories behind virtually new bikes, some two or three years old, but with only six or seven miles on the odometer. A young buyer finds out what insurance is going to cost him for a high-powered sport bike and walks away. "Or they got scared and never rode it," Schultz says.

Others got into trouble with financing, making a cash down payment but getting buried in monthly payments.

Some of the cars at Vail are unusual — or unusually well-cared for — vehicles. There's a shiny black 2008 convertible Smart Passion with 4,000 miles on it. There's also a 2006 Toyota Avalon with air-conditioned seats, adaptive cruise control, everything — but 72,000 miles on it.

Vail's online presence is such that the dealership doesn't miss having a big lot on a busy corner.

Weniger handles the front of the store operations, working on updates to the firm's Web sites. They do real-time online chat support via their Web site.

The operation in back is expanding, Schultz says, with the addition of equipment for changing motorcycle tires and a mechanic to do light motorcycle maintenance.

They're always adding something. The latest is their new motorcycle accessory retail operation, Gear Up! — www.gearupaz.com.

"Our walk-in business has increased exponentially with the motorcycle accessories," Schultz says.

Customers may come in to look at a helmet and stay to buy a bike or a car — or to flop on one of the fat couches in a corner of the store and watch sports on a giant flat-screen TV.

Or come back for even more on Sundays, when many dealerships are closed.

They also sponsor an online — Tucson Sport Bikes, www.tucsonsb.com — and real time motorcycle "meet up" group that organizes rides.

"We don't do business like anyone else," says Schultz.

Contact reporter Dan Sorenson at 573-4185 or dsorenson@azstarnet.com



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