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Beware of Runaway Egos

Michael Jackson, Tiger Woods, Elvis Presley...and you?

By William G. Leslie

Michael Jackson, Elvis Presley and Tiger Woods all have something in common with each other, and perhaps in common with some dealers.

All of them were (or are) self-motivated, talented, and extremely bright. The level of their success, if not unprecedented, was extraordinary.

What does that have to do with you as a dealer? Perhaps nothing at all. Maybe a lot.

At the height of their careers, each of these men had hundreds of employees and their family members depending on their talent for their livelihood.

Those employees watched these men climb to unimagined levels, and then fall, with devastating consequences for all.

Why did these three fall? Was it a loss of talent, old age or a change in the tastes of their culture?

No, Michael and Elvis had such incredible talent that they managed to reinvent themselves for successive generations and although they didn't fall at the peak of their careers, they each still had great talent to offer. And Tiger? At age 34, he still is a relatively young man as golfers go.

Each of them created their own fall from greatness. Each was a victim of his own ego. They had talented people around them, but their power and talent were so great that no one would risk telling them that they were being foolish.

People who took the risk of speaking up were fired for their trouble. Elvis had a handful of men who had been with him for decades. Some of them began to caution him about his abuse of prescription drugs. He had them fired.



If things keep on moving when you are gone, that doesn't mean that you are unnecessary. It means that you have hired the right people.

I don't know whether Michael or Tiger had people who were telling them of their foolishness. Perhaps everyone on staff was so afraid that they never spoke up.

What does this possibly have to do with a new-car dealer principal? You aren't famous, at least not as famous as Elvis. And this isn't about prescription drug abuse. Or about infidelity, at least not directly.

The auto industry has a great many dealer principals with over-sized egos who think they alone have the skills to manage a dealership.

You could quickly list 10 dealers that fit this description.

The problem with over-sized egos is that they tend to suppress any opinions but their own.

In fact, it generally isn't necessary to squelch a contrary opinion because chances are the opinion won't ever be voiced.

Yet it often is contrary opinions that stabilize powerful leaders, protect them from their faults and from the destructive power of an out-of-control ego that leads to:

"Only I know how to run a dealership."

"All of my ideas are well conceived."

"The success of my dealership is only the result of my efforts."

Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

An absolutely huge ego is a time bomb, waiting to explode.

To avoid their own weaknesses, Tiger, Michael, and Elvis needed to have capable people around them who would tell them when they were being foolish about drugs, inappropriate personal relationships and bad business ideas.

They did have bright people on their staffs, no doubt about it. But those bright people were afraid to speak up. Chances are you have smart people on your team. Your dealership owes its success, not to one person, but to a team.

Like those three guys, you have dozens or hundreds of people who are dependent on you for their employment. How many of them are willing to risk their job to tell you that you are making a mistake.

If you don't have them already, you need several strong team members who aren't afraid to speak up. And they can't just be your neighbors or friends from church or the club. You need people at the office who know you well, who understand your business, and who have seen your ego in full bloom.

You may be thinking, "That's not me." If not, good for you.

How can you tell whether your ego may be preparing you for a fall or might be preventing your business from reach-

ing the next level?

When was the last time that your business tried out a major new idea that wasn't yours? If all of the ideas worth trying are yours, you are wasting the talent of your team.

Have you recently fired a good long-time employee just because he disagreed with you? The debate of ideas, even your ideas, is healthy.

How many of your senior managers have been with you 10 years or more? Or have you run them all off?

How many of your team members would disagree with you or tell you that you are about to make a big mistake? If you don't have even one, chances are you have chased them away.

Does your business stop when you are away, because your people would rather do nothing than risk a failure? It takes a

team to run a dealership. If things keep on moving when you are gone, that doesn't mean that you are unnecessary. It means that you have hired the right people.

Are you spending more time on the golf links than in your office? There's nothing wrong with that. But there's a word for it: "retired."

Are you threatened by the growth or success of a subordinate? Your job as a manager is to foster, not inhibit, the next generation of managers.

You got where you are because of your skills, preparation, and drive. An out-of-control ego, surrounded by yes-men, can destroy you and your company. And you owe your employees better than that. ■

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Searched and Destroyed

LAS VEGAS—A car shopper using Google.com types in the name of a dealership that enjoys high local-marketplace visibility because of its advertising and community involvement.

But what comes up in search results is a link to a website that's designed to look like the dealership's page. But it isn't. It's actually a third-party site trying to siphon off the dealership's potential customers.

In such cases, "your brand name and cars on the lot are under attack," Brian Pasch, CEO of the strategic-digital marketing firm PCG, says here at the Driving Sales Executive Summit presented with WardsAuto.

Competitors and other businesses using search-engine optimization strategies are leading that charge.

Pasch cites another example in which typing in a Hyundai dealership results in Edmunds.com appearing as No.2 on the search listing.

"Edmunds is a great firm, but they are not a dealer's friend in this case," he says. "It's a third-party lead generator." As such, the online auto site could direct the Hyundai dealership's prospects to a competitor that buys Edmunds' leads.

What do Edmunds and other automotive firms do to rank so high on search results? They provide content, Pasch says. "They write about cars." Only a few dealers do the same.

That's why if a consumer types in "2008 Chevrolet Silverado Denver," no franchised dealers appear on the first Google page, despite an abundance of dealerships in that city.

Likewise, typing in "2009 Dodge Ram 1500 Baltimore" will result in six top search-result positions that have nothing to do with franchised dealers, Pasch says.

"It's not acceptable to let 60%, 70% or 80% of page-one search results be controlled by others," he tells dealers attending the conference.

Ways to gain a greater online presence start with uploading dealership brochures and videos, as well as engaging more with external links, Pasch says.

He also recommends creating more content on a dealership website by having a page for every '10 and '11 vehicle model. "Build a library for every succeeding model year," he says. "Establish a content-publishing process."

Search engines will pick up on such content. They also tie into blogs, social-media and press-release sites, so it behooves dealerships to maintain a name-recognition presence on those sites.

"The top term that drives traffic to a website is the dealer's name," Pasch says. "It's not hard to write for search engines."

For example, a posted press release mentioning a dealer's name and relevant information improves a search-engine ranking. ■

— By Steve Finlay

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