

PEOPLE POWER

Elaine Catton takes a closer look at her local Volkswagen retailer and finds a company with an enviable history of loyalty to the brand and to its customers...

NOW IN ITS THIRD GENERATION of family ownership, Cameron Motors of Perth is the oldest Volkswagen franchise still in the same hands anywhere in the UK. It just happens to be just half an hour from where I live and it's where I recently bought my lovely new Golf 1.5 TSI EVO Estate. Three very good reasons to turn our attention for a moment towards the dealership network and the men and women who form the bridge between us, the customer, and the thousands of designers, engineers, technicians, strategists and marketing people in Germany and elsewhere around the world.

Sitting in the meeting room of Cameron's Volkswagen in Perth on a sunny winter morning, a quick tally of the years of service to the company amassed by three of the four gentlemen with me in the room brought me to the impressive figure of 121. Allow me to present to you David Anderson, the company's former Group Managing Director, now retired and still serving on a consultancy basis, Phillip Stewart, Volkswagen Brand Director, George Malcolm, Group Managing Director who took over from David Anderson as Group



PHOTOS: Elaine Catton

Managing Director, and Carlo Corvi, Sales Executive, and the youngster in the line-up.

Cameron Motors was founded in 1932 by Ian Cameron, the current Chairman's father. Back then, the business was all about repairs, maintenance and the sale

of second-hand cars and accessories.

The association with Volkswagen began in 1953. Although part of the push in the British-controlled sector to get German industry back on its feet again in the post-war years, it was nevertheless a bold

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decision for a British company to sell German products at the time. Vehicles were still rationed and volumes were very low. There are no accurate sales figures from that period, but David Anderson reckons annual volumes of new cars were around the 20 to 30 mark. However, there’s evidence to suggest that the impact of rationing meant the used-car business was not a bad one to be in at the time, with two- or three-year-old cars selling at new-car prices.

Anyone arriving at Cameron Volkswagens on Dunkeld Road in Perth is greeted at the door by a gleaming grey Beetle dating back to 1954. It was one of those first new cars sold by the company, for the princely sum of £150! The lady who bought it kept it until 1976, when she traded it in (at Cameron’s, of course) for a Polo. The dealership decided to keep it and restore it and has displayed it proudly in the showroom ever since.

David Anderson’s life with Cameron VW began in 1962 at the age of 19 when he joined the company to help owner Ian Cameron on the sales floor. ‘I took the train from Montrose to Perth with a suitcase in my hand, and that was it,’ he says.

By that time, annual sales volumes had crept into three figures. Back then, there was no importer in Milton Keynes. Instead,

dealers in Scotland bought their cars from a distributor in Edinburgh called Croall & Croall. ‘We had to take the train through to Edinburgh to pick up the cars and drive them back to Perth,’ recalls David.

The Volkswagen association brought with it in an interesting mix of trade-ins that included such exotica as Messerschmitts and Goggomobils, not to mention the odd caravan and speed boat. There’s even one story that someone brought along a bunch of shotguns as a trade-in. Not sure how that would go down these days.

The late fifties and sixties were a boom time for Cameron’s, replicated all over the country as the nation took wholeheartedly to the motoring lifestyle. In addition to its VW association, it took on Volvo, BMW, Toyota, Vauxhall and even Haflinger, the Austrian off-road vehicle. Cameron’s was also the sole agent in Scotland for the quirky and short-lived Amphicar.

However, those associations all went by the wayside over the years, and Cameron’s has for many years now been focused entirely on VW, Audi and Volvo. This year, the Volkswagen dealership is aiming to sell 570 new vehicles and around 600 used VWs.

As David reflects on a commitment to the brand that dates back more than 55

years, Phillip Stewart points out the strong loyalty to the Volkswagen brand that lies within the dealership network. The 54-year-old has been with Cameron’s for 32 years, following in the footsteps of his father, who himself worked for the company for many years and was Group Managing Director at the time Phillip joined the fold.

Phillip sees his business as being just as much about people as it is about cars. In Cameron’s case, loyalty to the Volkswagen brand applies not only to the people who work for the company, but to its customers, too. He reckons that Cameron’s strong focus on customer care over the years has helped it build up a loyal following of repeat business. 27-year-old Carlo cites by way of example one of his regular customers who bought her first Golf from Cameron’s in 1974.

‘We’ve always prided ourselves in going the extra mile,’ says Phillip, even if that means repairing or even replacing a car out of the dealership’s own pocket. ‘We might have a disaster with a technical issue, but we end up with a customer for life,’ he adds.

‘And being an independent,’ says Audi man, George Malcolm, ‘it means we have the directors on-site and can deal with an issue immediately without having to refer to head office.’



Cameron’s location has also played a role in the development of a very geographically diverse customer base. George explains: ‘This was the main road up to the Highlands, so we used to get people coming in on their holidays. They would stop for petrol and end up buying a car. Then they would keep coming back.’

As a consequence of this and of the rapid growth of online marketing, Cameron’s has long specialised in stocking what Phillip refers to ‘the cars people will travel for’.

He continues: ‘We’ve probably got three times the number of Golf Rs than an average dealer of a similar size.’

In fact, having initially feared that computerisation would lead to

two sales staff specialising in Audi. ‘Even the workshops were separate,’ recalls George, although he goes on to admit that the parts department remained integrated, ‘but with two hatches,’ he laughs.

There’s no doubt that the inexorable rise of the internet and the burgeoning Volkswagen model line-up has brought substantial change to Cameron Motors since the turn of the century. And, in the factories and offices of Wolfsburg there may well be a degree of conviction that their cars are so well engineered that customers would be willing to buy them online and simply wire

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price pressure and damage business, Phillip and George have seen business increase as a result. ‘A lot of the cars we stock are high-spec. The internet has become our shop window and we’ve deliberately gone upmarket.’

In the relationship Cameron’s has enjoyed with the Volkswagen brand since 1953, it seems there have been surprisingly few major step changes, with the arrival of the Golf and then the Golf GTI being the first. It was another 20 years before the next one came along, when Volkswagen UK in Milton Keynes began the process of clear delineation between the Volkswagen and Audi brands.

For Cameron’s and other dealers, this brand separation meant the restructuring of premises and staff. The dealership built a separate Audi section that housed about four cars but had its own receptionist and

their money. So, is this changing the fundamental shape of car dealerships?

Phillip and George feel strongly that the business of selling cars is still very much about people. Phillip points to young sales executive, Carlo Corvi as a prime example of how things haven’t changed. ‘Carlo has people skills, and that’s what we’re looking for,’ he says. ‘Within months of coming into the business, he was one of the top sales people we had. A car can be absolutely fantastic, but if someone walks in here and doesn’t get on with the sales person, it’s all over.’

And in fact, the need for these people skills is now permeating further into the business than ever before. George explains that they have been working for some time to get more people in on the aftersales side who are good communicators, because they want them to interact with customers.



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ABOVE: L-R Carlo Corvi (Sales Executive), Jamie Cameron (Grandson of founder Ian Cameron), Phillip Stewart (Volkswagen Brand Director), David Anderson (Retired Group Managing Director) and George Malcolm (Group Managing Director – David’s successor).

‘It’s a service industry we’re in, so they have to be good at communicating.’

There’s no doubt, however, that these people skills and the bonds of friendship that Cameron’s has built up over the years with its customers were put to the test when the diesel scandal broke.

‘We were gutted,’ says Phillip. ‘We felt completely let down. The people who buy VWs from us are our friends, and suddenly they’re looking at us and thinking ‘Did you know about this?’ For us as individuals, it was pretty rough.’

However, Cameron’s customer base remained loyal and there was no major impact on business performance. Says George: ‘We didn’t go forward, but we didn’t go massively backwards either’.

‘I think the effect it had on us for about a year was that we lost conquest sales,’ adds Phillip.

Once the net widened and other manufacturers became caught up in the same accusations, Cameron’s felt the pressure soften and new business returned to the dealership. Nevertheless, it did have to switch its stock mix around pretty sharpish from its former 80:20 diesel/petrol split to the exact opposite.

‘It actually took quite a long time to make a difference. There was no real change in the mix until about April 2017 then it all went the other way within about three months.’

The catalyst for that was the news that diesels in general were bad and

not just VWs. Then France and the UK announced bans on internal combustion engines from 2040, which raised public awareness and alarm even further.

This impending move away from conventional engine power and other shifts in technology are also having a major impact on Cameron’s repair and maintenance structures. The body shop is a case in point. With most new VWs equipped with cameras and accident avoidance technology, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to crash a Volkswagen. ‘We’re seeing far fewer crash-damaged cars,’ says Phillip. ‘And that’s what we’re set up to fix – cosmetic damage.’

Looking to the future, Cameron’s investment plans are steered far more towards the infrastructure for electric drive and the electronics expertise of its people. Work is currently ongoing in front of the dealership to install a substation and power lines for rapid charging. ‘We’re the only dealers in the area to have that,’ says George. And with widespread electrification of the VW product portfolio just around the corner, Cameron’s is looking to retrain its entire technical staff in the space of just two years and has already changed its approach to recruitment.

‘We need a new breed of people,’ says Phillip. ‘If we take on an apprentice today, we’ll be selling a completely different type of powertrain by the time they qualify. We need electrical engineers.’

Any new technical apprentices taken on by Cameron’s now first have to go to an assessment centre. ‘They need very good school marks and exam passes and they need to pass the assessment, which is based on their ability to do electrical work.’

But despite all the preparations underway to face the inevitable changes around the corner, Cameron’s day-to-day business remains centred on conventional cars, particularly when it comes to the used-car market. Says George: ‘It’s all very well, but those buyers have another two cars to go before they’re into the new powertrain technology. It’s going to come, but it’ll take a bit more time until it’s mainstream, so we have to keep going with what we’ve got.’

And as we sit on the cusp of what most auto industry observers have been describing as the biggest technological shift since the invention of the automobile, car makers – sorry, providers of mobility solutions – will be depending on the people of businesses like Cameron Motors to manage that transition and smooth the path for people like you and me...



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