



All big things start small

By Ben Burd

All businesses start small. Some get bigger and some get even bigger, but all have one thing in common - the drive of the owner. Frank Stronach built Magna International from a small garage and a couple of toolmaking devices. Here in Cobourg the Vandermeer name had similar small roots. As a recent immigrant from Holland, Tony Vandermeer started work in a small, but well known Cobourg auto shop - Wilson's Firestone in 1974. But working for someone else did not sit well and he set up his own shop two years later, called it East End Motors and started to establish both a reputation and a lust for growth. Moving to the West end of Hwy 2, in 1980, Vandermeer Nissan came to life and the Vandermeer march of progress was born. In 1984 Tony moved the Nissan dealership to the NorthWest corner of Division St. and Elgin St. In Cobourg. The link between Cobourg and the Vandermeers had been cemented.

An opportunity to acquire a Toyota franchise came up, in 1988, and this time Tony's son - Hank grabbed the brass ring and Vandermeer Toyota was created. Within a year Hank had purchased the one acre lot to the North of the Nissan dealership and built the Toyota service and sales building on Division St. Hank appeared to be the perfect person to run this new enterprise from the start. The son of a pioneer who worked in the business from an early age and by the time he started the business he had been working as a certified automotive technician - if you are going to sell cars you had better know how to fix them! He took his seven employees into the new building and moved

onward. In 1999 he purchased the building to the North - the Transtek building - and used it for more inventory storage and a detail and cleanup shop. In the early months of 2011 he announced that he had struck a deal to bring the existing Nissan dealership (the dealership his dad - Tony - had sold in 2000) back into the Vandermeer fold, located to the South and expand once again.

“This is the biggest change since 1988.” Hank Vandermeer told *Business Times* in a recent interview. “We have come from selling



90 cars a year to three hundred and fifty new cars and two hundred used cars a year - we need more space and build on our customer base and repeat business.” Experience and statistics from Toyota estimate that the move to a new building and the expansion of the lot will generate twenty to twenty-five percent more business and Hank is relishing the thought and willing to put in the extra effort to bring it about.

When the move into the new building in the Fall of 2012 is completed he will have hired one more salesperson and an additional technician to bring the workforce to a planned twenty seven. The move will include three people who have been with the dealership since its Vandermeer start. Hank in all of his conversations about the business never fails to compliment the employees and colleagues and credits the success of the business to them. He is very proud of the fact that of all the Cobourg dealerships Vandermeer is the only one that rewards employees for their loyalty by giving them their birthdays off with pay.

The excellence of both the business and the employees has been recognised three times in the last fifteen years. Toyota’s “President’s Pride Awards” come around every year and each dealership is measured against a series of benchmarks that cover every aspect of the business. There are over three hundred dealerships in Toyota Canada and these dealerships are put into four categories, determined by sales and size, and the top five in each category win the Award. This year - 2010 - the prize for the nearly

one hundred dealerships that included Vandermeer Toyota, was a luxury Mediterranean Cruise. Asked if it was just for him he replied, "Employees have won individual awards for their work too the prize was a reflection of all of our efforts." Explaining that Vandermeer Toyota had won the Award previously in 2000 and 2005 he expected to be at the top of the ladder in a couple of years. "You can never repeat the year after winning as Toyota revises their benchmarks based on past performance, but we will get there again." he says confidently.



Hank excitedly tells *Business Times* about the new building. "It has been designed to enhance the retail and servicing experiences for the customer. The showroom floorspace will go from eleven hundred and fifty square feet to twenty-two hundred - almost double. This will allow the customer to explore more models in an indoor and climate

controlled atmosphere - we have room for six cars now we will be showing ten in the future and it will be very comfortable in the winter time! There will also be a four car drive-in service area. No more running in and out of the rain or snow to drop off the car for a service." In the expanded service bay area there will six service bays and two cleanup bays. Combined with the new bays and a more modern flowthrough system service delays should be minimized. Considering that the new design will not increase the space for inventory it means that the new space will allocated to customer convenience - more parking spaces for customers for instance.

The building will not just be a showpiece for cars but will be energy-efficient as well. The planned expansion will utilise the existing solar energy system now mounted on the Transtek building. "This is currently a 14KW system and we sell 10KW into the grid each month. This will be tied to the new efficiency standards of the Gold Standard LEED for building construction. Hopefully we can feed the new and larger building with this system."

Not only will the new building and the expanded business offer customers an enhanced retail experience but a new line of cars will give the consumer more choice. Hank told *Business Times* that Vandermeer Toyota will also be selling the SCION brand. This line of cars is made by Toyota but branded differently to appeal to a younger demographic of buyers. Founded in 2002 it has been introduced to Canada in phases. "We have been selected to market this brand and it will be a challenge we will meet." That means that with the eighteen models in the Toyota lineup consumers will have a choice from a total of twenty-two models. Ranging from the low priced Yaris Hatchback at MSRP of \$13,995 to the top of the line Sequoia SUV at \$48,820 every kind of consumer choice will be met. Hank, and all the sales staff are really proud of the hybrid line. In the Toyota lineup there are three hybrids: Highlander, Camry and the venerable Prius. "We have twelve years of hybrid experience and just last week we fitted the first replacement battery in our experience. The car, a Prius, was twelve years old and the battery had lasted two years past the warranty - a good run." Hank believes so much in the concept that his family car is a Highlander hybrid, "My wife loves it!"

Asked if he had any last words he just stated once more the virtues of the new building and how he knows it will please not just him and the employees but the County-wide customers and invited them all to keep in touch and come on in when it's finished.