

The Best RV Dealers Build Great Businesses in General

By Ronald K. Fleming

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Recently I was talking with the owner of a successful multi-location RV dealership.

We were catching up, talking about business and some of the challenges dealers are facing. Somewhere in the conversation, I asked him a question: "If I walked into one of your dealerships tomorrow and stopped one of your salespeople, then asked them, 'What are your company's core values?'... what do you think they'd say?"

He smiled. "Well... we have core values."

"I figured you did," I said. "But that's not what I asked."

He laughed. Then he got quiet for a moment. "You know," he finally said, "I'm not sure they could tell you."

That answer has stayed with me ever since. Not because I thought less of his dealership. Quite the opposite. He's a good operator with a successful business. But in that moment, neither of us was really talking about core values anymore. We were talking about something much bigger.

We were talking about whether the organization really knew what it stood for, where it was going and what was expected of the people who worked there.

After more than four decades in the RV industry — owning dealerships and eventually leading one of the industry's largest dealership organizations — I've become convinced that the biggest difference between average dealerships and exceptional ones isn't usually inventory, advertising, location or even the brands they represent. The best dealerships know exactly who they are, what they stand for, where they're going and what they expect from every person on the team.

More importantly, their people know it, too.

That doesn't happen because someone framed a mission statement and hung it in the conference room, or posted a mission, vision, purpose and core values on the company website.

Defining those things is only the beginning. The real test is how far they make it into the organization.

If you asked your department managers to name the company's most important priorities, would they give you the same answers?

If you asked five members of your leadership team where the company is going, would you get essentially the same answer?

And how much of what's clear around the leadership table is still clear three or four levels into the organization?

Maintaining that kind of alignment isn't easy. Sales has its priorities. Service has theirs. Parts and F&I have theirs. Each department has its own goals and pressures. Everyone can be working hard and even succeeding by their own measures. But that doesn't necessarily mean everyone is working toward the same thing.

That's where good businesses can get stuck.

Great businesses have a way to get people aligned and turn that alignment into consistent execution.

They put the right people in the right seats. They understand why the business exists and where it's going. They establish a handful of priorities instead of chasing 20 at once. They measure the things that actually matter. And they create enough accountability that commitments don't disappear into another busy week.

None of those ideas is particularly revolutionary. Doing them consistently is.

That's one of the biggest lessons I've taken from my career: the fundamentals of running a great business are remarkably consistent, regardless of what that business sells or does.

An RV dealership has its own language, economics and challenges. So does an HVAC company, a plumbing company or a manufacturer. But underneath those differences, great businesses have far more in common than we sometimes realize.

When I stepped away from running a public company and thought about what I wanted to do next, I kept coming back to those fundamentals. I wasn't interested in teaching dealers how to sell RVs. I became much more interested in helping business owners build the business behind what they sell.

That's ultimately what attracted me to the work I'm doing today with Pinnacle Business Guides: helping leadership teams create clarity, alignment and disciplined execution around the fundamentals that make businesses work.

Because whether you operate one dealership or 20, knowing what "good" looks like usually isn't the hardest part. Doing it consistently is.

Which brings me back to that conversation about core values.

Maybe the real test isn't whether a salesperson, technician or receptionist can recite them. Maybe the real test is whether your customers can experience them. Do they notice something different about doing business with your company? Does the culture you've worked to build show up in the way they're greeted, the way they're sold, the way their RV is serviced and the way problems are handled? Does it set you apart from the competition?

Because if the only meaningful difference between you and your competitors is price, eventually the conversation becomes about price, price and price. And competing on price alone is a race nobody wins.

A clearly defined purpose and meaningful core values aren't just words for the conference room wall. Done right, they become part of the customer experience—and part of your competitive advantage.

That's when you've built more than a dealership. You've built a great business. RVB