



Dealers Specializing in Mobility Motoring Report Strong

Customer Loyalty, Profits By Kristopher Spencer

Bob Baker of Koons Ford, a dealership in Annapolis, Md., spent a year and a half in a wheelchair following a collision with a drunk driver. More than 20 years later Baker knows that he was lucky to fully recover from that high speed crash.



That's why Baker, who has worked at Koons Ford since 1979, takes pride in helping customers with disabilities and who have specialized vehicular needs such as wheelchair lifts. This year, Baker expects Koons to sell 200 adaptively equipped Ford vans and minivans, making Koons a leader among North American Ford dealers participating in the company's Mobility Motoring Program.

"When we first started offering vans with adaptive equipment we had one customer every six months," Baker said. "After awhile, it was one every month. Now it's 10 or so every month and many are by referral."

Today, there are 22 million Americans and many others worldwide with physical disabilities. Since its inception in 1992, approximately 120,000 Americans with disabilities have utilized Ford's Mobility Motoring Program to acquire mobility-enhanced vehicles. Ford dealerships adapt about 16,000 vehicles each year with mobility equipment, holding approximately 25 percent of the mobility market share. Over three quarters of Ford's mobility-equipped

vehicles are E-Series vans and Freestar minivans.

Some of the common adaptive equipment found on those vehicles includes hand controls, lifts, hoists and lowered floors, wheelchair restraints, ramps, carriers, steering devices and door openers. The average cost for a modified E-Series van is an additional \$20,000.

"Many of the Ford dealers that offer adaptively equipped vehicles know either from personal experience or family or friends what it means to lose mobility," said Anna Zevalkink, Ford Global Operations manager for Brand Protection, who continues to promote the Ford Mobility Motoring Program. "They're driven to help others get their mobility back."

"When a person is disabled they should be able to go to any Ford dealership and get expert help in picking out a vehicle with the exact adaptive control features they need," said Mark Zach, conversion van and mobility specialist at Anderson Ford in Omaha, Neb.

Zach, who has been converting vans with mobility equipment for 20 years, is convinced that as the Baby Boomer Generation gets older the demand for OEM-standardized mobility-enhanced vehicles will increase significantly.

"Mobility is a tremendous growth market, but the company has a long way to go before it's really taking full advantage of the opportunity," Zach said. "The automaker that seriously embraces the mobility market will be seen as a leader."

Ty Beck, conversion van and mobility specialist at Jordan Ford in San Antonio, Texas, agreed that the company and more of its dealerships need to take a serious look at this growing market segment.

"When Ford made mobility training videos and Web-based training available it was merely elective for dealerships to participate," said Beck, whose son was born with a mobility-impairing disability. "For Ford to be truly competitive in this niche mobility training needs to be made mandatory."

Just as vehicle appearance is important to the average vehicle buyer, it also matters to people with disabilities, Beck said, adding that he strives to get families like his into mobility-enhanced vans that don't look institutional.

"The people who need these vehicles are the most loyal customers you'll ever have," Beck said. "And virtually everyone in their family will buy from you whether they need a modified vehicle or not."

Baker added that being a dealer that specializes in mobility equipment has a positive impact on the public's impression of the dealership.

"On a busy Saturday I might have one or two customers in wheelchairs looking at adapted vans," Baker said. "They're very appreciative customers and it shows our other customers that we're prepared to serve a wide variety of needs."

"More and more people know that we offer these vehicles. But a dealer shouldn't expect to have success with the program overnight. It takes time, but it's rewarding."

With so few dealerships specializing in mobility motoring, dealerships like Koons, Jordan and Anderson get customers who live hours away and have found them through referral or through the Ford Mobility Motoring Program's directory on the Internet at www.mobilitymotoringprogram.com.

"We've delivered mobility converted vans to customers as far away as New York and Seattle," Beck said.



Baker, Beck and Zach agreed that the key to success in the mobility motoring business is for the dealer to network with local mobility and medical equipment businesses that cater to people with disabilities.

"It's rewarding to serve these customers," Baker said. "I'm happy to know we've made a difference."



© Copyright 2005, Ford Motor Company | Rights are granted to the public to download the contents of this web page in electronic or paper form. All other rights are reserved, including the rights to create derivative works and/or other web pages.