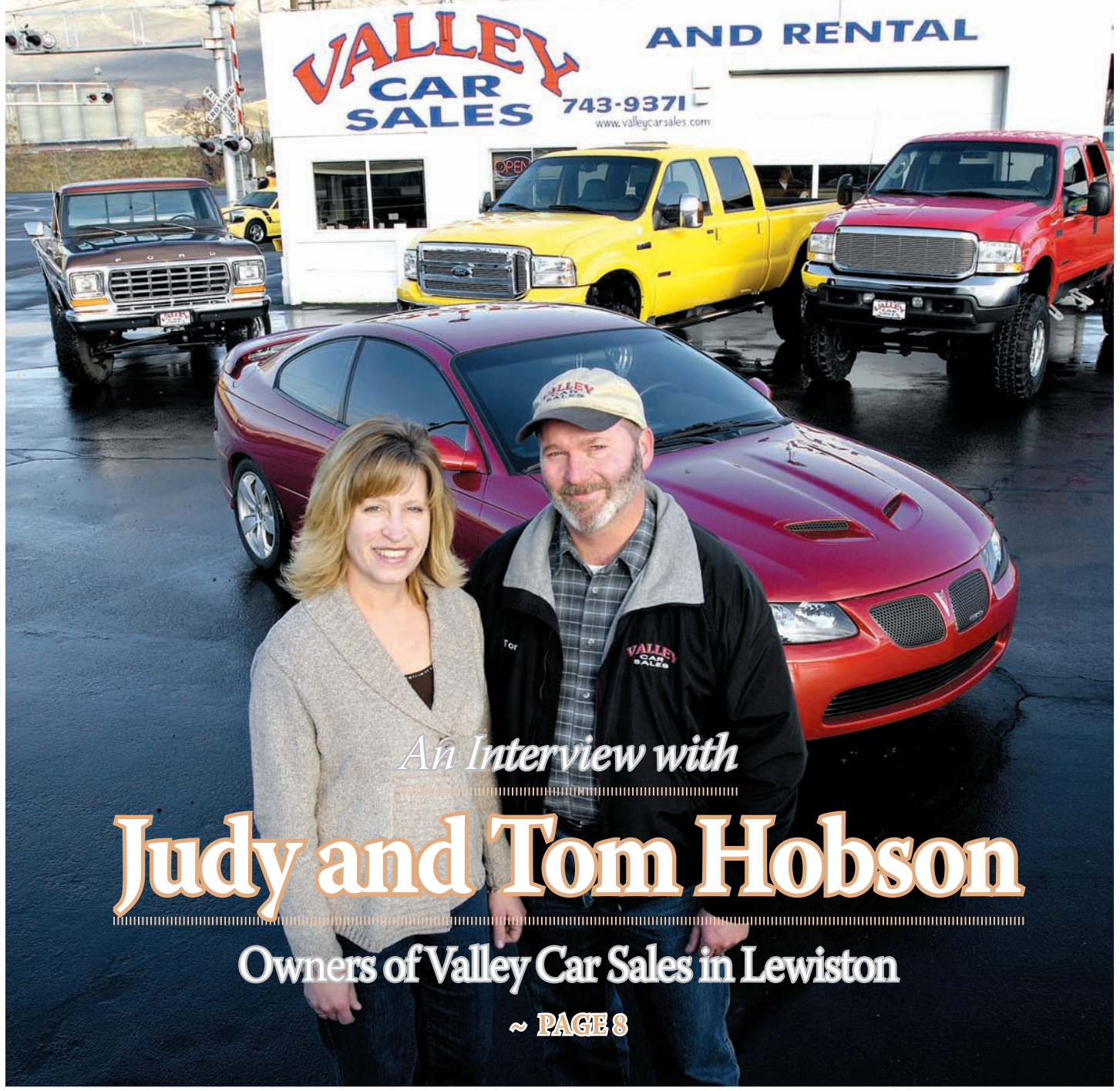


Business Profile

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An Interview with

Judy and Tom Hobson

Owners of Valley Car Sales in Lewiston

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A few steps toward boosting the bottom line

The world is changing and so is the way we, as business owners, interact with our customers. Although technology can open new avenues of communication and revenue, there is no way to truly replace one-on-one interaction and experiences.

The other day I was drawn into a conversation with some co-workers. They were reminiscing about experiences they had as children. Those childhood memories included special trips with their mothers to the tea room

at the Crescent in Spokane. They were trading stories about how much fun they had dressing up and how it was such a fine and memorable experience. Most of us have had wonderful experiences that have shaped our lives. It's no different with customer service. You either experience a lovely interaction or you're sorely disappointed. Customer service is an experience and those memories, good or bad, stay with us.

The power of the childhood tea room memories



COMMENTARY

Rene' Johnston-Gingrich

are also seeking out that personal interaction and want to be treated as individuals and not as a transaction. I believe it is worthwhile to stop and consider every aspect of what our customers or clients experience from the time they enter our place of business to the time they walk out our door. Are they treated like a guest? What do they hear? Does our place of business look clean and well-kept or does it look like we are hanging by a thread? What atmosphere does the lighting create? If appropriate, are they offered something to drink? Give me a cappuccino and you just gave me a reason to browse for at least 20 minutes whereas without it, I may grab what I need, make a lap around the aisles, and walk out the door. There are many low-cost measures we can take to provide the type of experience that makes our clients comfortable, secure in doing business with us and inclined to continue.

First we have to design a well-thought-out customer experience. The misconception here is that designing such an experience is costly. Certainly there are many worthwhile investments we

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DOERING

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your own blog, a community blog or on your Facebook or MySpace page.

Keep Everything Connected

Once you've created your page on Facebook, or established your blog or Twitter account or other online presences, cross-promote your content so that the same message is going out across every site. For example, Tweet about your blog post or send a link in a message to your LinkedIn group. Many social media tools can be integrated; you can display a Facebook badge or a Twitter widget on your blog or Web site.

Engage In The Conversation

An online conversation is taking place right now about your business, your indus-

try or issues affecting your community. Inject yourself and your opinions into the conversation by following opinion leaders on Twitter and social networking sites and commenting on blog posts. Whenever possible, include a link back to your content or Web site.

Engage With Customers

Your customers are talking about you online whether you like it or not: On their blogs, consumer-focused Web sites and on review sites such as Yelp, Yahoo! Local and CitySearch. While you can't take control of the conversation, you can help steer it by listening, engaging with customers and working to resolve any problems.

For more advice you can trust on running a small business, visit www.bbb.org.

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made me really think about the importance of customer service from the experiential perspective. What do we have today that compares? Have we lost the value of the truly fine experience? Are we embracing mediocrity and expecting it to deliver us a disproportionate level of success?

I strongly believe part of providing outstanding customer service involves providing a total experience. It is all the more important in this day and age when we are hyper-connected electronically but lacking in human connections. Our customers

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Work force is key to successful businesses

Q: How and what can we do to strengthen or grow our business in these difficult economic times?

A: Needless to say, 2009 was a challenging economic year for our nation, businesses and the men and women who, through their labors, create the products and services of our country. A nation's economic and social welfare depends not only upon the employment of its population, but in compensating, benefiting and caring for our work force. Sustainability of our families, communities and nation depends on the capacity, competency and commitments of our work force, business leaders and national political and economic leaders. Minimum-wage jobs, no benefits and waning job security compromise economic sustainability.

There are no panaceas or formulas to build and sustain profitability. However, successful industry leaders who use key business practices enhance probabilities of profitability. Innovation, creativity and employee empowerment are vital fac-



COMMENTARY

Leslie Rist

tors for building economic viability in this decade. Not only must leaders exercise these dynamics with precision, they must consistently and systemically connect these practices.

Building a viable business can feel tantamount to building the Great Pyramids.

Any great endeavor must begin with principled, passionate and purposeful strategic leadership. Effective leaders communicate desired values, beliefs and vision in every effort, shaping their culture into a performance powerhouse.

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can make in the workplace to create an outstanding experience, but many of the elements that make or break the customer experience are simply a matter of time, thoughtfulness and imagination. Interestingly, some of the most delightful experiences I have ever enjoyed in a customer service setting were created with very little expense to the business owner. I fondly remember a Valentine's Day dinner at a local restaurant. To our surprise when we arrived, the path into the restaurant and the linen-covered table tops were sprinkled with rose petals, a simple bud vase with a rose was placed on each table and they were offering a special valentine-themed cocktail. The point here is the entire concept and experience was created with minimal investment from the business, and the experience had maximum impact on the customers. I took friends there the next weekend and raved on and on to people about how great it was.

Secondly, we have to deliver that experience. We have to execute this well-thought-out plan and follow through on delivering that experience to our customers consistently. We have to have employees in place who are well trained, empowered and believe in the importance of delivering this exceptional experience, one that exceeds our customers' expectations. This is a key way to retain customers, build customer loyalty and create customers who will advocate for the growth of our business.

Thirdly, we want to come up with systems and procedures that enable us to de-

liver exceptional experience to our customers over and over again. Our businesses have to be dynamic and not stagnant in our operations.

We must constantly be obtaining and responding to customer feedback and adjusting accordingly, adapting to meet their needs. In the day of tight budgets an intense competition, it is not enough that we deliver an exceptional experience once; we must prove to our customer over and over again they have made the right choice in doing business with us.

I challenge all of us to consider the overall experience from the customer's perspective. What do they experience from the moment they drive up to the time they walk out your door? If you truly want your business to succeed, it's important to design, develop and deliver a customer-focused experience. When you aspire to over-deliver and exceed your customers' expectations, your customers will remember the overall experience of doing business with you. Your business will reap the benefits and you'll see the results. Businesses that uphold the tradition of excellence in service not only stand apart from the masses, they earn customer loyalty and outshine their competitors, which translates into increased revenue. Creating total customer experiences is another key strategy to continued growth and prosperity.

Johnston-Gingrich has been a business owner in the Lewis-Clark Valley for 15 years. She works as an independent trainer and consultant and is an adjunct faculty member with Lewis-Clark State College's business division. She may be contacted at www.rjitac.com.

Interlink Volunteers - Faith in Action Happy New Year!

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www.interlinkvolunteers.clearwire.net

Thank you for your kind consideration.

God bless you.

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