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Mungenast to join elite group of 'green' dealerships

By Christopher Boyce

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
04/22/2008

When the new Dave Mungenast Lexus of St. Louis opens in early 2009, the west St. Louis County auto dealership will be just one of four in the country built to meet the highest standards of environmentally friendly buildings.

This elite group of dealers is responding in part to growing pressure on the auto industry to be environmentally responsible. But the biggest draw is green marketing — an attempt to attract environmentally conscious consumers.

A Toyota dealership near Dallas, which opened in 2006, was the first dealership to construct a facility that received Leadership in Energy and Environmental Development certification. The U.S. Green Building Council bestows LEED certification on projects that are environmentally friendly in their design, construction and ongoing operation.

So far, the Dallas dealership is the only LEED-certified dealership facility completed. Others that are going green include a Buick-Pontiac-GMC and Cadillac dealership near Detroit opening this summer and a Nissan dealership in northern California scheduled to open in February.



The Toyota venture inspired the local project, said Ray Mungenast, president of Dave Mungenast Lexus. The \$16 million project will be the first "green" dealership nationwide for Lexus, which is part of Toyota Motor Corp.

Mungenast views the added cost to build a LEED-certified building as an investment in marketing. The site will replace the existing Mungenast Lexus facility nearby.

"We're trying to go in tandem with what Lexus and Toyota are doing," Mungenast said. "They have many (gasoline-electric) hybrids in their

line and more coming in coming years. We wanted to build a building that kind of dove-tailed with that."

His dealership is working with Chesterfield-based HDA Architects to get the LEED certification.

The dealership's green aspects will be subtle.

The 70,000-square-foot building will be oriented to the north to optimize natural light that will illuminate the showroom through a glass front. Half of the rooms will have individual temperature controls to cut down on heating and cooling costs. Furniture will be made from recycled materials. And to encourage employees to bike to work, bike racks will be placed in the parking lot, and the facility will have showers and a changing room.

There also will be displays in the dealership that explain how the project qualified for LEED certification, said Jack Holleran, president of HDA Architects.

Like most automakers, Lexus is encouraging its dealerships to consider LEED-certified buildings, though it's not providing funds. But the automaker believes the investment will pay off.

"When you look at our demographic, those folks are pretty affluent and well educated," Grant Fontan, Lexus' dealer facility design manager. "Environmental lifestyle quality is a high priority."

Still, green buildings may not bring greenbacks to all dealerships.

A few select vehicle brands do attract environmentally conscious shoppers, while others attract value buyers, said Ilhan Geckil, a senior economist for Anderson Economic Group, an economic consulting firm in Lansing, Mich.

Geckil, who studies both environmental issues and dealership trends, said brands such as Chevrolet, Hyundai and Toyota attract customers who make purchases based on economics. Even the success of Toyota's Prius hybrid has been driven mostly by customers seeking an affordable way to save money on gas, he said.

Lexus, Honda and Mercedes buyers are more likely to make decisions that reflect their lifestyle. But even among shoppers of those brands, there are few who will make buying decisions based on a dealership's ideology, Geckil said.

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"I think (the LEED building) might affect (Mungenast) positively, but the impact will not be very big," he said. "You can buy a hybrid, but I don't think people go to an environmentally friendly dealership because it is friendly. This is not the consumers' concern."

Even if consumers aren't attracted to green dealerships, there is value in constructing a LEED-certified building. HDA Architects said Mungenast's investment will pay for itself within five years through lower energy costs.

And while it might seem hypocritical for an auto dealership to build a green image when its products are harmful to the environment, the LEED-certified building will make a contribution to the environment, according to Ashley Katz, communications coordinator for the Washington-based Green Building Council.

According to Katz, 39 percent of all carbon dioxide emissions come from construction and use of buildings. While many consumers await technologies that reduce vehicle emissions, it's responsible for automakers and dealers to chip in where they can in the near-term, she said.

"Cars are a contributor to global warming, but buildings have the technology right now to make a change to the problem," she said.

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