

Lexus of Huntsville

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Lexus of Huntsville

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Delivery Area:

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By: Russ Heaps

Erick Francis already had 22 years of automotive-parts experience under his belt when he was hired to be the entire parts department staff at Lexus of Huntsville in 2001. The Lexus franchise was only about six months old at the time, representing one-third of a three-brand complex clustered together as the Huntsville Auto Plex on University Drive in Huntsville, Alabama. "It was a one-man shop when I started at Lexus of Huntsville, and part of a multi-franchise operation," Eric recalled.

Ellanae Hunt Fairhurst was the dealer principal for the complex's three franchises that also included a Dodge, as well as an Infiniti store. Fairhurst broke new ground as the first African American to own an Infiniti dealership and the first African American woman to own a Lexus store. After selling the Dodge

and Infiniti franchises, Fairhurst focused on the Lexus store now located at 6580 University Drive.

Named parts manager about three months after he started, Eric has watched the wholesale side of the parts business grow from virtually zero to the \$180,000 or so it averages today in monthly sales. No longer fighting the good fight alone, he now oversees a three-member team. "They weren't really in the wholesale business when I arrived," Eric explained. "I saw that there was a lot of opportunity to build that side of the business."

Wholesale was the area Eric loved and was well versed in. Welcoming the challenge, he set to work.

"Before coming to Lexus of Huntsville," he said, "I had worked at two big-time wholesale operations. I had a lot of wholesale customers who knew me, and I had already built a relationship with. I just got on the phone and started making calls."

Lexus of Huntsville Parts Department Team



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Brad
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Tom
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As the sales numbers escalated, Eric grew the staff. No one would call his three-person staff, big, but everyone wears more than one hat, filling in where needed. Lean and mean might be the best description. "I run a real efficient operation," Eric said. "There's no fat; there's no waste."

When asked what he looks for when replacing one of the staff, Eric was stumped. "Well, I don't know," he replied. "There's no turnover. No one has ever left. Customers working with us for six years or less have been dealing with the same people here."

Eric is convinced there are two reasons for the parts team's loyalty: Lexus of Huntsville is a good place to work and Lexus is a great product. "The environment here is positive and the place is loaded with good people," Eric stated. "And, Lexus is easy to work with. They make our job easier."

Tom Harvill and Brad Thornton transition back and forth between the parts counter and working with wholesale customers over the phone. According to Eric, Harvill's years of experience and remarkable product knowledge is exactly what you need in a streamlined staff. Thornton, who grew up in car dealerships owned by his family, is experienced in all aspects of the auto business; but his love for selling parts is reaffirmed every day.

Another reason the wholesale

parts business has grown at a relentless pace is that the lion's share of the \$350,000 in parts inventory on hand at any given time is devoted to what Eric calls "crash parts."

"I keep a good, clean inventory that's tailored toward wholesale," he explained. "I'd say 65% to 70% of my inventory is crash parts. Because of my experience over the years, I can anticipate what we need to have on hand to cover our customers' needs. That's what I stock."

Eric pointed to joining the Overnight Parts Alliance (OPA) as the idea he's had that made the biggest impact on business. An organization of parts departments from noncompeting dealerships, OPA not only increases the wholesale-parts reach of member dealerships, but also increases efficiency and lowers shipping costs. "Going with OPA years ago made a huge difference for us," he said. "I think we're the oldest non-charter member."

Adding that OPA continues to extend its delivery area, Eric said it now includes Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida's panhandle and nearly all of Tennessee. The third member of his team not only oversees the warehouse, but also delivers parts around the Huntsville area. "Whether it's local or part of the area serviced by OPA," he said, "If you order a part today, you'll usually have it tomorrow."

A basic business philosophy developed by Eric guides the parts team at Lexus of Huntsville. According to him, it is followed religiously and is responsible for the department's high level of customer satisfaction and loyalty.

"I believe in dealing with a customer in a way that shows respect," he stated. "That means always being honest in the things you say and the promises you make. If you are always honest, you'll keep their business. Sometimes it's painful. It's hard to tell someone you've made a mistake, but in the long run, it's the best way. We stand behind what we say we'll do."

As for what the future holds, Eric has but one target in his sights: Grow the business.

"My goal is simple; I want to create more business," he said. "Everyone at this dealership is committed to increasing business and taking care of the customer. Everyone is pulling in the same direction to go above and beyond. My guys and I share that idea. And we're doing it one customer at a time."

The parts department at Lexus of Huntsville is open from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. It's closed on Saturday and Sunday. Outside of the Huntsville area, the toll-free number is 855-528-0487. Locally the number is 256-824-8075. ■