

Buick dealers pin hopes on full-sized Lucerne

By **Jamie LaReau**

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Bob Fusco sold six new Buicks last month at his dealership in Long Island, N.Y. Although he typically sells twice that many, six put him ahead of the curve for U.S. Buick dealers.

Buick averaged sales of four new vehicles per dealership last month - beating out Ferrari dealerships by just one sale. That leaves sales-starved dealers such as Fusco pinning their hopes on the full-sized Lucerne sedan that Buick is launching now.

Although October was a particularly rough month, Buick dealers have struggled with low volume for a while. In September, Buick sold eight new vehicles per dealership. Buick dealers averaged nine new vehicle sales per dealership in September 2004 and six in October 2004.

Buick sales are down 8.5 percent for the first 10 months compared with the year-ago period. Buick is banking on the Lucerne and a new marketing campaign to ignite the brand.

Nothing new until 2007

The Lucerne's success is critical. It must carry the brand for a year; Buick dealers won't get another new product, a crossover, until early 2007.

"This is the car that's either going to save the brand, or the brand is doomed," Fusco says. "I don't see how they can sustain Buick if the (Lucerne)

doesn't work." The Lucerne replaces the Park Avenue and LeSabre, which GM phased out with the 2005 models. Those two vehicles combined sold 75,094, or 30.8 percent of total Buick sales, through the first 10 months of 2005.

GM started shipping the 2006 Lucerne to dealers on Oct. 29. Fusco got his first two on Nov. 17. He had not sold them as of last week. But John Rogin, owner of Rogin Buick in Livonia, Mich., has sold all 12 Lucernes he has received.

"That's because you've got all the old LeSabre and Park Avenue customers waiting for the car," Rogin says.

Buick cannot rely on loyalty alone to carry it, says Doug Scott, an auto analyst at consulting firm GFK Automotive in Southfield, Mich. "It's not too late to save Buick if you actually get that awareness level way up," he says.

A Buick spokesman says GM is confident that the Lucerne "will be successful in the marketplace." GM would not provide any Buick executives to discuss the brand.

Making promises

GM executives told dealers last month that it was switching from the "Dream Up" advertising slogan to "Beyond Precision," to emphasize quality and engineering.

"As opposed to 'Dream Up,' 'Beyond Precision' is a step forward because it references some kind of substance and commitment to something instead of some vague sentiment," says Marc Babej,

president of Reason Inc., a New York marketing consulting firm.

He warns that if Buick is going to advertise that theme, the product must live up to "the promise." Otherwise, Babej says, that kind of slogan "can really boomerang on you."

Scott agrees. He says the "Beyond Precision" slogan is tough for a nonluxury brand to carry off when luxury brands such as Lexus have delivered the high quality the slogan implies.

Buick dealer Tommy Brasher says the Lucerne will boost dealership morale. Brasher is on GM's national dealer council.

He sold six new Buicks last month, which he says is typical for his small dealership, Brasher Motor Co., in Weimar, Texas. His goal is to consistently sell 10 Buicks a month.

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