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Interview with Morrie Wagener

BY STEVEN SCHUSSLER



MORRIE WAGENER IS THE FOUNDER AND CEO OF MORRIE'S AUTOMOTIVE GROUP. His love for automobiles began as a young boy and he was able to pursue his passion for cars by attending Dunwoody Technical Institute in Minneapolis. In 1957 he graduated at nearly the top of his class and he started his career as a mechanic working on imports at a small dealership in Wayzata. In 1958 he became a service manager, where he built a loyal customer base. By 1963 he had acquired his first franchise, the Citroen brand, and in 1966 he expanded his business include a Saab dealership, which is still in operation today. Today Morrie's Automotive Group has grown to 12 unique franchises and two body shops in 10 different locations with more than 500 employees. Morrie is one of the most down-to-earth people I have ever met, and as a fellow car enthusiast and collector, it was an honor to spend time with one of the true leaders in the automotive industry.

SS: How does a hometown local mechanic go from fixing cars to becoming one of the most successful automotive entrepreneurs in the state? **MW:** I had my dad's work ethic and my brother taught me that "It's not who you are, it's what you are." My dad bought a farm and in the summer, all nine of the kids in my family worked there. In addition, at age 14, I was offered a job at a garage and I pumped gas and worked on manure spreader tires. I took \$100 and bought a 1947 Mercury. Four years later I sold it for seven times what I had paid. When I graduated from Dunwoody Institute in 1957, I worked as a mechanic and then a service manager and within six years I had acquired my first dealership.

SS: You are a graduate of Dunwoody Institute (now named Dunwoody College of Technology) and you speak very highly of the school. To this day you have a special relationship to the school. Please tell me more about that. **MW:** Dunwoody's mission was never just teaching technical skills – there has always been a big emphasis on values. I have never forgotten the lessons I learned. I have served on their board of directors and I am currently on the board of trustees. I have helped lead fundraising campaigns for the college and through a scholarship program we help support the automotive industry. I am a huge fan of Dunwoody and how they impact the lives of the students.

SS: Morrie's auto dealerships are known for their outstanding customer service, and you have said it is one of the most important things you have built the business on. What is your philosophy? **MW:** Give your all and serve your customer with enthusiasm and sincerity. You can never go wrong going the extra mile and doing everything in your power to exceed a customer's expectations. Always do right. It simply works to do the right thing each and every time. And give back. The Morrie's family of dealerships supports our communities through numerous local programs that support important causes.

SS: The auto business is a tough, competitive business. What has kept you in the industry for all of these years? **MW:** My passion for cars is a huge factor. That is why everyone should build their career around something they truly love. I also get tremendous satisfaction from building long-time relationships with customers and employees and all of the other people I meet throughout the course of business.

SS: Are there sacrifices you have made in order to build your business and achieve success? **MW:** I am a lucky man. My wife and I have been married 50 years and we have four beautiful children. I worked 6 ½ days a week and never once did my wife complain. She is a very special person and she made it possible for me to put all those hours in and build the business.

SS: What advice would you give to encourage young people and entrepreneurs to pursue their dreams? **MW:** Be passionate about what you do. Education is important and don't stop learning. A true education may begin in school but it certainly doesn't end there. Always give 110 percent in everything that you do.

SS: Have you ever put everything on the line without knowing if it would work, and that the outcome could be that you end up with nothing? **MW:** Many, many times. When you are building a business, you have to take chances and believe in yourself and the business. Part of the growing pains of expanding your business also includes borrowing money and getting loans from the bank.

« Steven Schussler (steven@schusslercreative.com) is the founder, chairman and CEO of Schussler Creative, Inc., which specializes in creating, designing and developing theatrical attractions, restaurants, retail stores and entertainment venues worldwide. He is also the author of the book, *It's a Jungle in There - Inspiring Lessons, Hard-Won Insights, and Other Acts of Entrepreneurial Daring*.