VERTU MOTORS – DRIVING CHANGE

Vertu CEO Robert Forrester looks to the future.

Here at AutOh! magazine we're not only obsessed with cars and love driving them so that we can review a variety of models for you, we're equally obsessed with the automotive trade in general…what makes it tick, how it's preparing for the future and how it can help the communities where dealerships and car firms are based.

The influence car dealerships have on the community is enormous. Over the course of a year, it's highly likely that you'll be visiting a dealership either to change your car or get it serviced, repaired or have the MOT updated.

Or of course, you could be one of the hundreds of people who work in the region's dealerships.

And then, the daddy of them all, there is the Nissan factory which, along with the support network, will be responsible for paying the bills of thousands of North East households.

So, we thought we'd have a health check of the automotive scene in the region by speaking to Robert Forrester. He's the CEO of Vertu Motors, based on Gateshead's Team Valley. He's the ideal person to use a crystal ball to tell us what we can expect from his company, from the automotive industry overall, and of course what could be the effects of the UK Government's push for us all to drive battery powered vehicles?

"We are one of the largest businesses in the region - certainly the largest motor retailer in the North East - so we're aware of the influence we have," said Robert. "The Automotive industry is also a really important part of the UK economy...something which I feel we don't get sufficient credit for. The industry is going through a massive transition that is somewhat painful. Government regulation of markets is normally a bad thing and I'm afraid the automotive industry is being affected... and it's not pleasant. The government's aim is to make everyone drive electric cars, but they don't seem to be aware of the consequences of forcing that through. For example, last year the sales of cars to private individuals was the lowest in the UK for 25 years. The industry as a whole sold fewer cars in 2024 than we did during Covid when dealerships were closed. That's not good news for the retail sector or the manufacturers. We might be moving towards net zero emissions but it's crucifying the industry. You're not allowed to sell cars that people want and we as a company make money on...we're forced to sell cars that people possibly don't want.

"As a business though we've done phenomenally well in terms of electric car sales, but the problem is the government targets for the automotive industry...it's very unhelpful to the UK economy and to the automotive industry."

So tricky times for the automotive industry as a whole but, bearing in mind that Vertu Motors as a business has never lost money, you'd expect them to come through and be an example of how to be successful no matter what. But what sort effect can that have on the communities in which dealerships like Vertu are based?

"As the 4th largest automotive retailer in the UK we're fully aware of the influence we have on communities," said Robert, "and it's why we try to involve ourselves as much as possible in supporting a whole raft of ventures. Sport is our biggest one, especially football...we're the title sponsors of the upcoming Vertu Trophy which has its final at Wembley. We're also Official Partners of Sunderland AFC, Birmingham City FC, Burnley FC and Plymouth Argyle FC, to name just a few we're proud to support."

Vertu also sponsors cricket, including Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Warwickshire and Somerset County Clubs and, here in our region, the Newcastle Eagles Basketball club who play at the Vertu Arena. No surprise that they're involved in motorsport...Vertu is the title sponsor of the VERTU MINI Challenge, and has a race team part of the British Touring Car Championship.

They're also heavily involved with the new Co-op Arena in Manchester, with naming rights to Vertu Place inside the venue, which is their largest involvement in the entertainment industry. Vertu is also an Official Partner of the Theatre Royal in Newcastle.

Sponsorship is one of the reasons why the Vertu group is undergoing a major change.

"We've decided to rebrand all of our dealerships under the Vertu banner," adds Robert. "Macklin Motors in Scotland was the first and the next will be Bristol Street Motors. Bearing in mind we have so many dealerships across the UK, it made sense to gain as much publicity as possible from the events and businesses that we sponsor. Having three different brands meant that some parts of the company were missing out. The EFL Trophy used to be known as the Bristol Street Motors Trophy, which was great for the 90 Bristol Street Motors dealerships, but it meant Vertu and Macklin Motors were missing out. Consequently, by the time we reach this year's final at Wembley in April, all of our dealerships will now be able to get involved with the EFL Vertu Trophy. We're also really pleased that Birmingham City FC have reached the final...it's an especially exciting event for us as their Partner."

The future is going to be very different in terms of the products that Vertu sells. Whether you like it or not...unless the UK Government changes its mind (again)...January 1st 2030 will be the day that you can no longer buy a conventionally powered petrol or diesel car. It will be battery powered. However, the track record of Vertu Motors with Robert Forrester at the helm since the company was formed in 2006, is hugely impressive. They're a jewel in the North East business crown and can look forward to a bright future which is great for the region's economy and great for the North East communities.