



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [Sacbee](#) / [Business](#).

---

## Sales skills came early

### Nissan's star dealer in Elk Grove takes care of workers, customers

**By Mark Glover - Bee Auto Editor**

***Published 12:00 am PDT Friday, July 27, 2007***

John Driebe's rise in the auto business was foreshadowed early when, as a rookie, 23-year-old car salesman, he sold a vehicle to the first customer he encountered.

Twenty-five years later, Driebe (pronounced DREE-bee) finds himself operating three local dealerships -- Nissan of Elk Grove, Infiniti of Elk Grove and Florin Road Kia in Sacramento.

His Nissan dealership in the Elk Grove Auto Mall is the top-performing Nissan store, by sales volume, in the automaker's Northwest region. Also, it's selling more new-for-2007 Nissan Altima Hybrid sedans than any outlet in the nation and, as best as Nissan officials can tell, in the world.

Ask Driebe about the secret of his success and he will tell you about thoughtful team-building and his insistence on over-the-top customer service. But he said it probably goes deeper than that.

The Fort Lauderdale, Fla., native grew up in a household immersed in selling. His parents operated a gift shop and home accessories store, and Driebe said their hard-working, retailing work ethic rubbed off on him.

At age 13, Driebe was working in a roller-skating rink. At 15, he landed a job with J.C. Penney Co.

Driebe said his sales skills enabled him to earn \$12,000 during his senior year of high school. From there, he went on to community college and Florida Atlantic University.

And yet, he still wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He opted to be a car salesman "for something to do," going to work in 1981 for a Fort Lauderdale Volkswagen-Mazda dealership.

Things went OK, but Driebe longed for more responsibility, which ultimately prompted his cross-country move in 1985, when he became a sales manager in the Bay Area for a Colma dealership under the Tom Price Dealership Group.

In 1989, Driebe had an opportunity to become part-owner of a Mitsubishi store or another Colma operation selling cars from a little-known newcomer called Lexus. He went with Lexus, but his share of the dealership was later bought up by Sonic Automotive Inc. of Charlotte, N.C.

Driebe worked for Sonic for a time but ultimately decided that he "didn't want to work for a large

corporation." So, when the opportunity came to take over a Nissan-Kia dealership in Sacramento in July 2001, he made the leap "from the big Lexus store to the little store on Florin Road."

Even as Driebe made the move to Sacramento, the promise of bigger things lay ahead with a planned move to the Elk Grove Auto Mall off Highway 99. Driebe's Nissan operation opened its gleaming, immaculate store there in August 2003. The neighboring Infiniti of Elk Grove dealership opened the following March.

With wide aisles, an extensive parts department and a state-of-the-art service center, Nissan of Elk Grove has become the flagship, based on monthly sales volume, of Driebe's local stores. It sells about 200 Nissans a month, up from an average of 30 when Driebe took over the Florin Road Nissan store just six years ago (Infiniti of Elk Grove sells about 75 high-end cars a month; Florin Road Kia averages about 50 unit sales monthly).

"This lot is so clean, it looks like a computer company," said Sacramentan Cindy Knox as she shopped at the Nissan dealership this week.

Clean, modern facilities are nice, but Driebe said he believes people make the difference.

During an interview in his Nissan of Elk Grove office, Driebe said he takes great care in choosing employees. He wants people who work well together and are considerate of the public.

"The most important thing we do is take care of each other here at the dealership. We treat each other with respect," Driebe said. "I think that attitude helps us with our customers. We want them to feel comfortable and respected."

Former colleague Keith Katz, who worked with Driebe at Lexus of Serramonte in Colma from 1992-99 and is now general manager of that store, noted that Driebe's style is not pushing all the hard work onto employees.

"It's rare that you will find someone as dedicated as him or someone who works as hard as him. He really leads by example from that viewpoint," Katz said. "He doesn't ask his employees to do anything that he wouldn't do himself."

"He's also extremely loyal to those who have gotten him to where he is."

Driebe conceded that he's customer-service driven. The Nissan of Elk Grove car-delivery area -- enclosed, spotless and styled with mirrors all around -- is a prime example.

"We don't want customers who have just bought a new car standing out in the rain or out in the heat," Driebe said. "It's just a little something we do to make it more special for them."

Then there's the "Quik Lube" facility situated between the Elk Grove Nissan and Infiniti dealerships. It's there to do oil changes and other routine maintenance in quick order, so customers don't have to leave their cars for a whole day to get minor service. No appointments are necessary.

Another customer-service bonus: Anyone who buys a car from Driebe can get a free car washing at the Quik Lube building ... anytime.

"It's not unusual to have 300 cars go through the carwash on a sunny weekend," he noted.

Driebe also runs the Florin Road Collision Center at the Florin Road Kia site, 3810 Florin Road. There, bent body parts can be reshaped or replaced, paint can be applied and extensive repairs done.

The collision center, Quik Lube shop and dealerships are all under Driebe's For Any Auto Group ([www.foranyauto.com](http://www.foranyauto.com)).

Driebe's approach has won high praise from Nissan's top levels.

Nissan of Elk Grove won the 2006 Global Nissan Sales and Service Way Award, recognizing superior customer service. The store was one of only four out of 1,069 Nissan dealers nationwide to receive the award.

That might be one reason that 40 percent of Driebe's Elk Grove customers come from outside the Elk Grove area.

Other must-do Driebe practices include advertising "more than one" car at a sharply discounted price (Driebe dealership ads typically include 10 at bargain prices); no sticker markups; and strong parts/service follow-ups with customers who buy cars.

"Sales sell the first car. Parts and service sell the second and third cars," Driebe said.

One of those who has come back a couple times to purchase sleek Nissan 350Z sports cars from Driebe's Elk Grove store is Howard Frasinetti, co-owner/ operator of Frasinetti Winery & Restaurant in Sacramento. He described Driebe as remarkably "approachable" and noted that the Nissan store treats customers well after a sale.

"The great thing about them is you call them, they call you right back," Frasinetti said. "To be truthful with you, it's not totally convenient to take my car back down there (for parts or service), but I do because they treat me well. And if I'm not happy, I don't have to pound on the door.

"If you're not happy, (Driebe) wants to hear about it. I think his philosophy is very similar to small business ... . He cares about how people feel about his business and how they're treated."

While acknowledging that sales of the gas-electric version of the Nissan Altima sedan don't match those of the cheaper, smaller Toyota Prius hybrid, Driebe said Nissan of Elk Grove has made a concerted effort to make sure employees are versed in every aspect of hybrids. He said that has been key to posting strong Nissan Altima Hybrid sales.

"We try to work with our customers, because we know what they expect from a hybrid -- technology and research," Driebe said. "We try to be a little more informed, because hybrid buyers really do their homework."

Go to: [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

---

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.  
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852  
Phone: (916) 321-1000

Copyright © [The Sacramento Bee](#)