

Opening the dealership door to the next generation

By Sue Robinson, CEO, NFDA

Across the world, automotive retail is changing quickly. How we attract and keep good people in a job market being reshaped by AI, economic uncertainty and changing expectations of work is a huge challenge.

That is why I was so interested to hear about NADA South Africa's Motoring Mavericks programme, which aims to generate greater interest among young people in careers across automotive retail. It is exactly the kind of initiative our sector needs: practical, positive and focused on showing the next generation that a dealership is not just a place where cars are sold, but a gateway to varied, skilled and rewarding careers.

In the automotive sector, we spend a great deal of time talking about targets, mandates and market share. We talk less often about the people who sell the cars, service them, advise customers and keep businesses running day to day. Where the next generation of those people comes from is one of the biggest questions facing our sector.

The challenge is clear. In the UK, official figures show that the number of young people not in education, employment or training has passed one million for the first time since 2013, around 13% of all 16 to 24-year-olds in the UK. That is a huge pool of young people who have not yet found a route into work, often simply because nobody has shown them where to look.

Automotive retail is well placed to help change that. Franchised dealers employ around 540,000 people across roughly 4,500 outlets in every part of the UK, and the career offer is far broader than most people realise.

Yes, we need technicians, including specialists trained on electric and hybrid vehicles. But we also need sales advisers, marketing and digital specialists, finance teams, parts and logistics staff, customer service professionals and future site leaders.

Too few young people, parents or career advisers see the industry in that light. Ask a sixteen-year-old what a job in the motor trade looks like, and the answer is often still overalls and oil changes. That picture is out of date, and it means we are missing out on talented people who could build rewarding careers here.

That is why NFDA created Drive My Career: to connect young people with dealer apprenticeships and entry-level roles across the country, putting real vacancies, real stories and real career paths in front of them. It also helps us reach people who may not have seen automotive as a place for them, including more women, who remain under-represented across too much of the industry.

Automotive retail is a major employer, a presence in every town and region, and a vital part of the UK economy. If we want young people to see it that way, we have to tell that story better and open the door wider.

The task now is to tell the story of the automotive sector globally with more energy and consistency. Programmes such as Motoring Mavericks and Drive My Career show what can be achieved when the industry works together to open the dealership door wider. If we want young people to see automotive retail as modern, inclusive and full of possibility, we must make sure they can see themselves in it.

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