

# DRIVING Change

John Roca has a vision to dispel myths about car salesmen and make his businesses, Sydney City Toyota and Sydney City Lexus, the best in the industry for customer service.

Images courtesy of Sydney City Toyota and Sydney City Lexus

As a young adult, John Roca was mad about rugby league and cars. That, he says, is where it all started. Now the dealer principal and co-owner of Sydney City Toyota and Sydney City Lexus credits his start in the industry to his sporting culture and background.

“Basically, as a school leaver I was a promising rugby league player, and one of our sponsors [of the team] happened to be a very prominent motor group,” John explains. “I chose to join them as an employee to support the sport that I was playing. Long story short, I did my first stint and stayed in the car industry ever since and worked my way up from a trainee sales position through to where I am today.”

John has worked for a number of different brands, in both the retail and corporate sectors, before he and his business partner (the Sci-Fleet Group) purchased Sydney City Toyota and Sydney City Lexus a few months ago. “I’ve represented a few manufacturers—mainly Toyota, Lexus, Mercedes-

Benz, and BMW—at both a retail level and an executive level. I worked 17 years in retail before being offered a position as senior manager and then CEO of Lexus Australia, which I did for nine years and learned some of my best lessons in business.

“From there my ambition was always to return to my retail roots. I actually wanted to buy a dealership but couldn’t find one at the time. So I left Toyota Australia and was appointed dealer principal of BMW Sydney and MINI Garage Sydney, which are the biggest BMW and MINI dealerships in Australia, owned by BMW themselves. Then an opportunity came up with Toyota and Lexus via a long-term friend, now partner—Toyota Australia were tendering/selling their retail interest in Sydney, Sydney City Lexus and Sydney City Toyota, and through a winning tender with the Sci-Fleet Group, we have purchased both Sydney businesses.”

Mindful of his start in the industry, John and his business are assisting community and sporting

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organisations today, including the Sydney Children’s Hospital, the Sydney University Flames basketball club, Easts Rugby Club, and National Tree Day, just to name a few. “It’s important that we support our community. Whether it is charities or schools or sporting clubs, there are a lot of programs that we run and support, and I think it’s important that we give back to the community as much as the community gives to us. That’s a critical part of our business, and it’s good networking as well.”

John’s focus on people and community is shown in his management style. He understands that the car industry has a bad name, and wants to change that. It’s something John has learned, he says, from people he has worked with over the years. “I have had some great mentors, people that I have learned a lot from, learning what not to do and what to do. I guess when you have been doing something for as long as I have, you pick up some great lessons along the way. You know, a lot of people don’t want to say, ‘I am a car salesperson’—it’s not an ambition that people grow up with. >



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"I feel that I have been contributing to a change that in terms of what I or we could offer within an industry that had a poor reputation, and I guess to a much smaller degree it still has—unfairly, in my opinion, although it has changed in the past decade as manufacturers and dealers now clearly understand the importance of customer service and loyalty."

Despite his career, John isn't what he calls a 'car person' in the technical sense; he knows the basics but isn't a mechanic. His strengths lie in being a people person and focusing on customer service in his dealerships. "My thing is that I am a good people person," John says. "I am not a car person; I am not very technically minded when it comes to cars, and probably more technical with people than I am with cars. But through my experience, I have been given some lessons in terms of what to do and what not to do and I have just grasped on what I felt would work and what wouldn't work. I think in terms of my management style, I am pretty much somebody that allows people to express themselves naturally, and I see myself more as a coach and mentor as opposed to a manager. One of the other things that I have been very successful in is having customers following from

franchise to franchise, including staff, because of my focus with the human as opposed to the machine, if you know what I mean.

"From the outset, I think what we need to realise, and what I keep telling my team, is that the product we sell can basically be purchased at 241 other places within the country. So the point of difference isn't so much the product; it's the people that they deal with. You've got to be the sales person that people go to; you need to be trusted. You don't need to win every dollar; you're going to win some, you're going to lose some, but it's all about the experience. They can buy that particular car somewhere else. The problem with the other dealership is they don't have John Roca representing them, and that's going to be the critical difference."

John has also been focusing on helping customers with financing and being able to purchase the car they want. He wants to build relationships and to work with their individual needs. "Our challenge isn't so much selling the new shiny car; consumers are walking in wanting that anyway. Ours is more like problem-solving, where consumers have gotten themselves into a finance contract and what they owe on the car is

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more than what the vehicle they have is worth. It's educating buyers about doing it right the first time so we can then get them into the next car in three years time as opposed to five years time because they don't need to wait that long anymore. It's finding a solution and package that are individualised to the needs of our consumer. What I am trying to say is: 'If I sell you a car, this will not be your last car'. So when I look at my clients, I look at them holistically and say, 'Well, you're going to buy a part from me. You're going to service your car here. It isn't just about me selling you a car—it's about building a relationship and supporting our customers through their time of ownership, not just the initial sale.'

This, John believes, is going to be especially important in the future with the way the retail industry is changing. He wants to make his dealerships like a car club, providing luxurious service to customers. "I think the future of retail is changing dramatically," John says. "We need to start thinking about dealerships as being more of a destination. Like a club, we need to offer our customers a sense of belonging where they can shop through the dealership and they can renew their insurance, they can renew their registration, and receive exceptional service."

"We come holistically as a solution for our customers to meet their motoring needs in all aspects whether it be service, whether it be warranty, whether it be re-registration or changeover of their car—and looking at the life cycle where we are saying to consumers, 'We are going to make this process easy for you. If you deal with us, you will be a customer or guest for life with us'. We are talking about cafés within the business, restaurants within the business, delivery galleries where customers come and meet one another. 'Moving forward, your experience with Sydney City Toyota and Sydney City Lexus will be a bit like belonging to an exclusive club.'"