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Moving Forward

New Zealand-based company Hellaby Automotive has expanded internationally by acquiring complementary businesses to encourage growth.

Images by Dries Naude, Profiled Productions

Hellaby Automotive, part of the Hellaby Holdings Group, is one of the fastest-growing automotive companies in New Zealand. With a range of businesses and brands across New Zealand and Australia, the company has grown organically and through a clearly defined acquisition strategy. CEO Colin Daly came to the company just over two years ago, and has made his mark with a focus on employee and team engagement and customer satisfaction, which he believes are the key for companies to grow quickly and sustainably. Colin spoke to *The CEO Magazine* about what he thinks makes a good leader, why people are the key to success, and his vision for the future of Hellaby Automotive.

The CEO Magazine: Can you give an overview of your professional background and how you came into your role at Hellaby Automotive?

Colin: I emigrated to New Zealand 14 years ago, almost to the day. In the UK, I worked just with one company, Sainsbury's, and enjoyed a varied career with roles covering product management, marketing, branch management, regional operations, head office, and major

projects. I was approached to come to New Zealand to run a group of Auckland-based supermarkets for Woolworths NZ, who at that time—2001—were owned by Hong Kong-based Dairy Farm International. Following a takeover by Progressive Enterprises Limited, I was appointed to lead Woolworths NZ throughout New Zealand. That all happened during my first six months in the country. I then held various leadership roles within Progressive prior to becoming an NZ citizen—the key catalyst for my decision to explore further career opportunities and pathways in other industries.

My first move away from the supermarket aisles could not have been more different: accepting the challenge to head market-leading automotive parts retailer and distributor Repco New Zealand. I led New Zealand operations for a little over two years spearheading a significant business turnaround. When Repco was delisted from the ASX in 2007 and acquired by private equity company CCMP Asia, I was asked to add Australian operations to my role. I commuted between Auckland and Melbourne for just under three years. Whilst it was a very exciting and invigorating time in my career, during which we achieved outstanding results, I missed my family! My wife Anita and

our two sons, Josh and Ben, have been immense support throughout my professional career—they've had to put up with the hours and time away – I couldn't have achieved what I have without them.

The GFC hit and provided an opportunity to review professional and personal priorities, and I decided it was time to make a permanent move back to NZ. I was given the opportunity to head leading electrical-parts wholesale and distribution company Redeal, which is a member of the Rexel group of companies, a multinational based out of Paris. This was a tremendous challenge at a quite tumultuous time for the global marketplace. Multiple banners to markets were amalgamated into one powerful offer, Ideal Electrical, and despite the need to reduce branch and team numbers, we delivered improved performance and profitability. To complete my NZ story, I then arrived in my current role with Hellaby to lead their nine automotive companies.

How would you describe your leadership style, and how have some of those previous roles influenced that?

I've always been a leader who acknowledged the deep >

"I set about earning the respect of my people, endeavouring to fully empower them, and then adding value to that team through effective coaching, support, and mentoring."

- Colin Daly



importance and contribution of people—critically as customers and members of the team. Interpersonal skills, effective networking, and relationship building are critical leadership abilities. I endeavour to adopt a leadership style that places development and empowerment of people at the very foundation of the organisation. I believe this has always held me in really good stead. Position does not deliver respect of your people, your team—you have to earn that. I set about earning the respect of my people, endeavouring to fully empower them, and then adding value to that team through effective coaching, support, and mentoring.

Without high engagement and buy-in from your team, even the best strategic plans should be left in the briefcase. With high engagement comes enthusiasm and energy and a feeling anything is possible. It really spins my wheels, pardoning the pun, when the team celebrates their success, reflecting on that success and believing that it was their achievement. As a leader, I consistently highlight and acknowledge successes—we all enjoy positive affirmation from time to time! I've consistently led with high customer-centricity, their experience of and satisfaction with your business. To be truly successful in any market, you need to understand your customer; imminent failure looms when you don't! When you gain insights and understand customer motivations, you are perfectly positioned to achieve outstanding results.

How has Hellaby Automotive grown and expanded since you've come to the company?

We turned over NZ\$170 million at the top line when I joined Hellaby back in April of 2013. At the end of the last financial year, sales had increased to over NZ\$200 million, not including the benefit from recent acquisition JAS Oceania. So this year, expectations are ahead of last. We've added three acquisitions and now have nine companies within the automotive division. In total, there are 110 operating

branches (85 in NZ, 25 in Australia), and at last count we had over 700 employees. Growth has been achieved both organically and via the acquisition of businesses in the automotive space. We will definitely be pursuing further acquisitions in both New Zealand and Australia that complement the existing portfolio and that offer potential to add scale and value.

What does Hellaby Automotive do to constantly improve its offering to customers?

First, we've taken independent automotive businesses and worked a collaborative platform of behaviour into a lot of what we do. I think that's one very significant change that we've delivered to the businesses, looking at ways where they can work on a collaborative basis to improve the offer that the customer receives. We've measured customer satisfaction across the businesses, and we've looked at the different feedback that customers have given us, and then specifically centred in on those aspects that the customers are telling us are most important. In my experience, focusing on these critical elements, receiving rich insights, and delivering successful improvements has a dramatic and positive impact on overall levels of customer satisfaction. Continuous improvement of the customer experience ought to be a core activity for all businesses.

We've also completed employee-engagement measures and developed clear plans to focus on those aspects of business operations that can give a lift to engagement levels.

In my experience, improving satisfaction levels of customers and lifting employee engagement to a high level almost always correlates to better overall business results.

How do you ensure you hire and keep the best people so that the company continues to grow and expand?

I think you've got to ensure that you develop talent, and, with the

right blend, also bring in additional talent from external sources. When I joined two and a half years ago, there were a number of our existing teams who had done an excellent job over a sustained period of time. They'd built very good businesses and been stable and together for, in some instances, over two decades. Recognising the need to take the next leap in performance and to ensure a proactive approach to increasingly disruptive technologies and market dynamics, we set about delivering a well-managed transition within the leadership teams and their operational leadership cultures. We've attracted top-quality external talent to complement the great calibre of the existing team. Their introduction has increased our breadth of experience and widened the knowledge base inputting into business strategies.

We've had great success developing key talent within our existing teams, and we continue to build a strong talent pipeline through succession planning and development programs. Looking for opportunities to promote people, but also looking for opportunities to bring new people in, is critical.

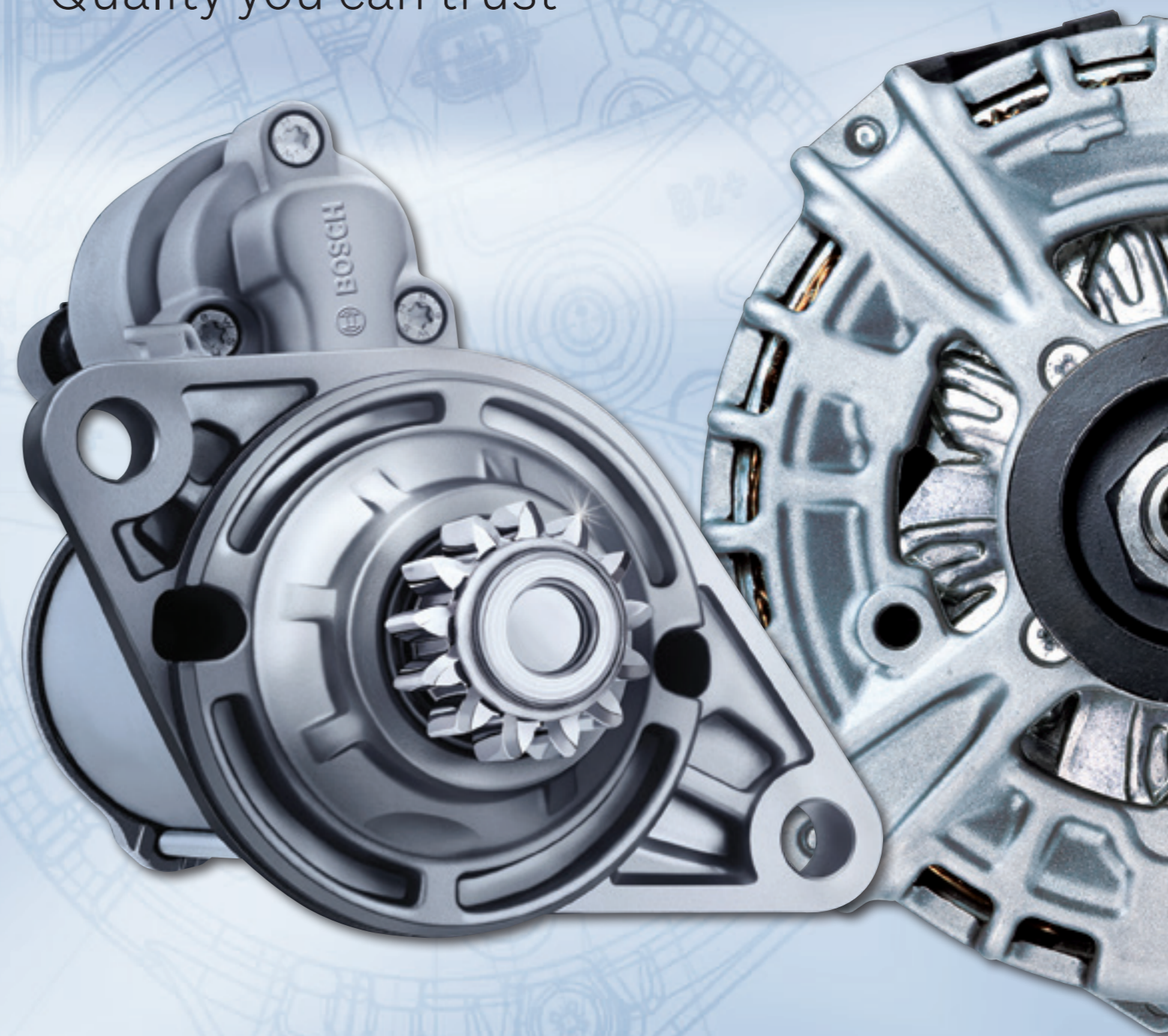
What does the future hold for the company?

We will continue to look for the right complementary acquisitions in both New Zealand and Australia and look to accelerate organic growth via our existing portfolio. At the heart of it all, the focus on our people will remain strong—customers enjoying high satisfaction and a rich experience in their interactions with our businesses. And, of course, engaged employees enjoying and enthused about their roles and their being a part of a special team. •

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