

Star Dealership

THIS ISSUE WE SPOTLIGHT SMART CENTER BLOOMFIELD OF BLOOMFIELD HILLS, MICHIGAN

During our recent twenty-four hour test drive of a smart fortwo passion cabriolet, *Star* Associate Editor Mary Hedberg and I had the opportunity to spend some time with Ken Kettenbeil, Director of Communications for smart USA and David Schrembri, smart USA President. They graciously took time from their busy schedules to show us around the smart center Bloomfield dealership and to share their views on the smart and its future in America.

smart center Bloomfield is typical of smart dealerships around the country since they are all styled to a similar appearance. The dealerships share the basic styling aspects of their sister smart stores in Europe. A black facade wraps around the building and a large smart sign is placed above the front door. Inside the dealership the floor features white tile and the walls are white with yellow and black accents. This decorating theme was chosen to make the cars the stars with the attractive but simple surroundings playing a supporting role to the smart vehicles.

USA consumers will experience a unique retail environment when entering a smart center. Each is equipped with a parts and accessory boutique, a comfortable waiting area with free Wi-Fi, a smart cutaway chassis that shows the safety features of its Tridion safety cell, and much more. All dealership employees reflect the spirit of the brand and embody the smart enthusiasts' forward-thinking attitude. The staff members at each

dealership are certified as smart specialists and have undergone extensive product knowledge training. All have a focus on smart customer service and satisfaction.

The reaction by auto dealers around the country has been overwhelming: smart USA received more than 1,400 applications to become a smart dealer. Although many were qualified, only a few were selected. Approximately 75 carefully selected dealerships will sell the various fortwo models by the end of 2008 in major cities across the United

States. Approximately two-thirds of the dealerships are affiliated with existing Mercedes-Benz dealerships. These dealerships have a wall separating the brands and a separate entrance. The balance of the stores are stand-alone facilities.

We continued our dealership tour with a visit to the service area. I was amazed at how small the service bays were but, after all, the cars themselves are small. No need for wasted space. A technician was preparing a smart for paint protection, which Ken told me is a pop-



A smart in the "holding" area, waiting for its new owner.

WWW.SMARTUSA.COM



The smart center Chandler in Chandler, Arizona, is an example of a Mercedes-Benz/smart dual dealership.

SHANE J. WIT

ular option among new owners.

We then moved on to a very unique aspect of the dealership: a “holding” room where new owners become personally acquainted with the features and operation of their smart before taking delivery. This hands-on approach insures that the new owner is very familiar with how everything works on their vehicle.

Ken told us that www.smartusainsider.com, an online owners’/enthusiasts’ club, has been created. In Europe, where the smart has been on sale for over ten years, owners get together and exchange body panels to create a whole new look for their smart. Because the body panels are made of lightweight, molded plastic, they snap on or off very easily. Today you might be driving a silver and black smart and tomorrow a bright yellow and black one because you traded your body panels with a fellow smart enthusiast last night.

Ken also told us that USA smart owners are very proud of their cars and a large number of them invest in vanity plates. I was curious about the smart’s logo so I asked Ken what the icons represented. He told me that the C = wheel and the ==> = forward motion which exemplifies the company’s thrust. Forward motion can be seen throughout smart center Bloomfield, the only Michigan smart dealership and the attached smart USA Headquarters.

smarts capture quite a bit of attention, as we found out during our test drive. Sometimes

smart owners do not have the time to spend answering the numerous questions that curious onlookers ask every time you stop at a restaurant or for gas. To help these owners, smart USA has developed a courtesy card for the owners to hand out that covers basic smart information and provides contact details for the closest smart dealership.

Ken said that future construction plans for smart center Bloomfield include a smart (display) tower patterned after the ones seen in Germany. They are also building a test-drive track adjacent to the dealership for those who prefer to have their first smart driving experience in a controlled environment. We then passed from the dealership into the attached smart USA Headquarters. Here we saw college interns making calls to new owners as a courtesy, including questions about their overall satisfaction with the smart and asking if they had any concerns, etc.

Ken then left us in the very capable hands of smart USA President David Schrembri since he (Ken) had to catch a plane that afternoon for smart’s (only) assembly plant in Ham-bach, France (which is otherwise known as smartville). David’s passion for the car was very evident as he spent time explaining the smart phenomenon. According to him, it is the only car in its category and appeals to people of every income bracket and social status. It is desirable to a student, a commuter, or an empty nester. Due to its low entry level pricing, its main competition is

really a remodeled kitchen or a two-week European vacation. The smart is accessible to nearly everyone—it is a dream within reach. David feels that the smart is a trend as opposed to a fad. He stated that a trend is sustainable while a fad is not.

The smart was launched in the USA with a non-traditional marketing strategy. A “discovery” marketing plan was employed that involved a hands-on approach where smart cars were taken around the U.S. to be viewed and driven by curious, as well as serious, potential buyers. A \$99 deposit will still put you on the waiting list for a new smart. The current waiting period is around twelve months. Occasionally, an “orphan” smart becomes available for immediate delivery when its potential owner was not able to complete the purchase transaction. Penske Truck Leasing, whose infrastructure was already in place, provides free smart 1 roadside assistance for the first two years. Parts distribution for smart USA is done from a Penske parts warehouse located in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

David feels that because the smart is a member of the Mercedes-Benz family of quality vehicles that seals the deal for many potential owners. He wanted to thank Mercedes-Benz owners and MBCA members for being so supportive of the brand during its launch in the USA. He concluded our time with him by saying, “It is the right car, at the right price, at the right time for our crowded cities and depleting oil supplies.”—*Jim Luikens*

The service bays are smaller than normal, but so are the cars.



The center’s interior mirrors the feel of the European smart dealerships.

