

## Business Profile

**L**ife in Skokie, Illinois was great – and getting better for Bob Vusich. He had just completed his first year at Northpark University and had plans to become a dentist. He was just 18 years old.

Then, one day, out of the blue, his father came home from work and informed Bob, his mother and two sisters that he was offered a job opportunity in... *California*.

The family was surprised.

*What, leave our comfortable and secure Midwest home and lifestyle for ... California?*

“I didn’t want to go,” Bob says.

But his father said, “Son, we’re a family and we move to California as a family.”

Bob was not one to disobey. He was re-



# *Loyalty & Longevity*

*By Rick Weinberg, Editor, California Business Journal*

*A random request by his mother led Bob Vusich into the Rusnak Auto Group 37 years ago -- and he's never left. Today, he is not only the longest-tenured employee at Rusnak, he has been an indispensable force with superior managerial and problem-solving skills.*

spectful. He was brought up the old fashioned way – the Midwest way.

What he father said, went. And that was that.

“There’s something special about the Midwest culture,” Vusich says. “It’s about respect. It’s about responsibility. You take care of family – you love, care and provide for them. That’s the way we roll.”

her son.

“I was shocked,” Bob says. “That was the last thing I ever expected to come from my mother.”

He could hardly wait to get across the street and grab the brochure. “I couldn’t stop day dreaming about driving a Porsche,” he says.

When he walked into the dealership – Rusnak

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And off to California they rolled -- from Skokie to the stunning, picturesque town of La Canada, an affluent city in the shadow of Hollywood, the film capital of the world.

The year was 1976.

**S**hortly after the move, Bob and his mother, Dorothy, drove to Old Town Pasadena to check out Ambassador College, where Bob wanted to enroll and continue his quest of becoming a dentist.

“I liked the school,” he says. “It was a small, private college where you receive a lot of one-on-one instruction. That appealed to me a lot.”

After touring the campus, Bob and his mother stopped at a local market. As Dorothy stepped out of the car, she noticed a Porsche dealership across the street. She stared at it and smiled.

“Robert, please run across the street and get me a brochure for the Porsche 924,” she told

Pasadena Porsche Audi – he was greeted by salesman Gil Light. After receiving the brochure, “for some reason, I still don’t know why -- it was just a knee-jerk reaction -- I asked Gil if the dealership needed any help,” Vusich says.

He needed a part-time job, after all. And he loved cars-- and Rusnak was right around the corner from the University. It appeared to be the ideal place to land a job at 18 years old.

The same day Light introduced Vusich to Sales Manager Tony Van Wagner, who asked the young Midwestern, “Do you know how to detail a car?”

“What do you mean ‘detail?’ Vusich responded, quizzically.

“You know -- clean and polish a car,” Van Wagner said.

“Sure, I can do that,” Vusich replied.

“OK then, let me see your car,” Van Wagner



said.

Vusich led Van Wagner outside to his car, a 1970 Peugeot 504. Van Wagner inspected it like a diamond appraiser examining a 10-carat rock. He checked everything – from the door jams to the trunk. He was impressed.

“Start on Monday,” he said.

That was 37 years ago – January 10, 1977. Vusich has been at Rusnak Auto Group ever since – in a variety of top management capacities. The company has even created numerous special positions for him as the company’s needs evolved.

He is as much of a fixture at the organization as founder Paul Rusnak and any of the marquee vehicles that the renowned dealership

group has been selling for more than a half century. No one has been with the organization longer than Vusich – except for Paul Rusnak himself.

“I didn’t intend for this to become my career,” Vusich says. “It just happened.”

Vusich soon became close with Rusnak and Operators Director Ron Taylor. They were like second fathers to him. Vusich was also spellbound by the ethics and morals of the company -- the manner in which the organization treated customers so impeccably and fairly. Like royalty.

“Every day, I saw examples of the ethics of the company,” Vusich says. “Coming from the Midwest, where morals are extremely important, I grew up knowing the importance

***“From Day 1, he has been an amazing employee – the best kind of employee a company can have: honest, responsible, committed, hard-working and loyal. What else is there?” — Rusnak Auto Group Operations Director Ron Taylor***

and value of having good, strong ethics. And Rusnak showed its high principles on a daily basis. It had a big effect on me. I knew that was the kind of company I wanted to be part of.”

Every day, Vusich became more comfortable at the company and the longer he was at Rusnak the more indispensable he became in the minds of Taylor and other high-ranking executives.

**V**usich became such a trusted member of the “Rusnak Family” that Paul Rusnak himself would ask Vusich to drive his two young daughters, Liz and Victoria, from their La Canada home to the family vacation house in Palm Springs – a two-hour trek. He’d also drive them to the family’s Lake Arrowhead vacation home.

“That speaks volumes of the trust Paul had -- and has -- for Robert,” Taylor says. “From Day 1, he has been an amazing employee – the best kind of employee a company can have: honest, responsible, committed, hard-working and loyal. What else is there?”

And it’s not like Vusich wasn’t a good student, as Taylor quickly points out. “He was an A student. Majored in biology, minor in chemistry. He would have been very successful as a dentist or anything else he chose to go into to.

He is an exceptionally bright man.”

At the time, a flood of American dental students were travelling to South American countries to get their dental degrees and subsequently coming back to the U.S. to practice. When Vusich discovered that the salaries topped out at around \$50,000 annually early on, he decided that dentistry might not be in his best interests for the future, especially since things were going so well for him at Rusnak. He weighed his options. He talked to Taylor. They decided that if Vusich stayed with Rusnak, the company would promote him accordingly.

“We did not want to lose a person of Robert’s character and integrity,” Taylor says. “He’s the kind of person you want in your organization. If you searched high and low and for years, it’d be difficult to find someone like him. He’s that unique, that special.”

It was nevertheless difficult for Vusich to completely give up his dream of being a dentist. He wound up attending USC, but as Rusnak grew, so did Vusich’s responsibilities, and he became entrenched in the organization.

**S**tarting off as a lot porter at the age of 18, Vusich was promoted to the parts department in 1981. After 1 ½ years there as a counterman, he became a service advisor for Porsche Audi.

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***— Ron Taylor***

His ultimate goal was to become a General Manager of a dealership, and soon he became familiar with virtually every department in the company. Other than Paul Rusnak and Taylor, no one knew more about the organization than Vusich.

Near the end of 1983, Vusich returned from a vacation and some colleagues told him, “Did you know that you’re going to named Service Manager for a new Rusnak dealership?”

Vusich was speechless. He walked over to Taylor’s office, where he discovered that the rumor was reality.

From that point on, Vusich moved from dealership to dealership in a variety of positions. He was the company’s go-to guy – whenever a store had an issue or a problem, particularly in service, the solution was simple: Call Bob Vusich.

He became an authority on how to run the department – which is very important to a company like Rusnak. The service area is where a dealership can lose a lot of money unnecessarily, so it’s imperative to have someone in that capacity who is completely honest and trustworthy.

Someone like Vusich.

“We knew with Bob there, we didn’t have to worry about how that department was going to operate,” Taylor says.

Sven Larson, the General Manager of Jaguar Land Rover Anaheim Hills, points out that the easiest way for a dealership to lose money is performing work on a car under warranty and then finding out that the work is not covered by the manufacture. The dealership ends up eating that, he says.

“There are literally hundreds of ways for a dealership to lose money through improper warranty claims and Bob is a master at making sure that does not happen,” says Larson, who requested to have Vusich join him at Anaheim Hills moments after he accepted the GM post in 2012.

As Vusich points out, “You have to have your service processes very buttoned up and you need to follow the manufacturers’ guidelines to a tee. If not, you can lose hundreds of thousands of dollars ... *annually.*”

**B**y October 1986, Rusnak was rapidly expanding, having acquired the adjacent buildings on Colorado Boulevard. The Rusnak Deal-

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erships now occupied an entire city block. The first new dealership to open was Jaguar.

Vusich even helped lay 12,000 tiles to get the store ready for its grand opening. He was named Service Manager of the store.

Word travelled throughout the organization that if a dealer had issues, Vusich was Mr. Fix-It. The General Managers of individual dealerships were climbing over each other to get Vusich to their store.

In 1993, when Rusnak purchased a Mercedes-Volvo dealership, GM Brian Beatt phoned Taylor and told him, “I need Bob Vusich here.”

Done.

When 25-year veteran Service Manager Mel Hammer retired in 1996 from Rusnak’s Pasadena Porsche Audi dealership, Taylor immediately brought Vusich over so the store would continue running seamlessly without the experienced Hammer.

After Vusich’s first stint as a Service Manager, “whenever we lost a service manager or had a problem in service at a store, we moved Bob there and without exception he did a magnificent job,” Taylor says. “When we grew and needed a Service Manager to oversee two dealerships, Bob stepped in and again did a masterful job.”

When Rusnak decided to create a Service Director position to oversee all of the Pasadena dealerships – all seven of ‘em – Vusich took on that heavy burden.

“And when we needed someone to take over a new safety committee, well, we chose Bob for that, too,” Taylor says.

As the automobile became more sophisticated, Rusnak created a Head of Training title, and well, you guessed it – Vusich was the choice

for that position.

Not long after that, when Victoria Rusnak took over as President, she decided to create a Fixed Operations Manager position – and she tapped Vusich for that job.

Vusich has even conducted numerous investigations for the organization. He has an innate ability to spot problems and corrupt behavior.

***Vusich walks into work every day with a smile on his face and perfection on his mind. He greets everyone on his staff each morning and asks, “Are you going to be our hero today?” Or “Are you going to be the one to pull us out of a jam today?”***

“If it smells bad in any way, Bob won’t do it,” Taylor says. “He has never had a problem telling me something is wrong with a store and why. He is one of those guys who plays the game one way -- the right way. He is a high integrity guy, period.”

Whoever you speak to about Vusich, they rave about him – his character, his truthfulness, his flawless managerial and customer skills.



He walks into work every day with a smile on his face and perfection on his mind. He greets everyone on his staff each morning and asks, “Are you going to be our hero today?” Or “Are you going to be the one to pull us out of a jam today?”

“You cannot work for a better person,” says Shane Boal, one of Vusich’s technicians.

“He’s such a compassionate, easy-going guy. If you have a personal issue you need to handle, it’s no problem. He says, ‘I’d rather have you here happy and not hurting.’”

“He knows how to manage people very well.”

It’s Vusich’s relaxed personality and calm style that makes him so likeable. He immediately credits Taylor, Paul Rusnak, his parents and his Midwest upbringing for shaping his character and managerial approach.

“The worst thing a manager can do is go at

someone and say, ‘Get this done,’” he says. “That approach will only hurt. To me, it’s about respect.”

It all comes down to this with Vusich: “He honestly cares about people,” Taylor says. “He’s totally genuine. When people know you care about them, they go overboard for you.”

That’s the secret to managing -- and as Larson quickly points out, “No one’s better at that than Bob.”

**Bob Vusich**

**Jaguar Land Rover Anaheim Hills**

**5425 E. La Palma Ave.**

**Anaheim Hills, CA 92807**

**(714) 693-4646**

**[www.JLRAH.com](http://www.JLRAH.com)**

**[bvusich@jlrah.com](mailto:bvusich@jlrah.com)**