THE PRINCIPAL:

BOBBY CRABTREE AND A FAMILY LEGACY IN MOTION

Some people ascend the corporate ladder, navigating mergers, management tracks, and public company politics until they reach the top. In the auto industry, though, the pinnacle doesn't come with a C-suite title–it comes with the title of dealer principal.

It's a position that confers more than authority: it's a legacy. often earned over generations. For **Bobby Crabtree**, becoming dealer principal wasn't just about running a car dealership. It was about carrying the weight of a name that's been stitched into the fabric of American automotive retailing for nearly a century.

Crabtree wasn't just born into the car business—he was literally born *in* a car. "A '64 Imperial," he says, laughing, retelling the story his mother used to love sharing. It's a fitting beginning for someone who's now in his fifth decade in the business and the third generation to hold the reins. His grandfather was a Dodge dealer in the 1930s in New Rochelle and Pelham. New York. His father took the torch and expanded the family empire through the mid- to late-20th century, operating a constellation of dealerships at a time when American auto retailing was as much a cultural institution as it was a business.

Bobby entered the business officially as a teenager in the late 1970s, cleaning cars during summers. After college, he followed family tradition by first working for the manufacturer—Toyota, in his case—to gain perspective from the other side. It was a lonely assignment in the Midwest, but he gained insights that would become invaluable later. "You learn how important the distribution process is." he says. "You see how the manufacturer thinks. and it makes you a better dealer."

Returning home, he joined the family business in New Rochelle in 1988 before the New York operations were sold in1989. Then he went to the Colonial Toyota dealership in Connecticut and started back at the bottom—selling cars. His father insisted on it. "I told my father I'd already been desking deals. He told me, 'Start at the bottom again,'" Bobby recalls. It was humbling. But it was also the beginning of his journey toward leadership.

By the early 1990s, Bobby was running not just Colonial Toyota but also overseeing Lexus and Toyota stores in Westport. He was learning how to scale an operation while maintaining its culture—something that would come to define his leadership style. That era, however, was also marked by loss: his brother Michael passed in 2003, his father in 2005, and his brother Joe in 2008. With family partnerships becoming increasingly complicated, Bobby made the hard decision to sell some of the Westport operations to maintain unity. He returned to Colonial Toyota as his sole focus, poured his energy into rebuilding, and ultimately built the first Image II Toyota facility in Connecticut.

From 2008 to 2022, he ran Colonial Toyota as a standalone success story—one of the top Toyota dealerships not just in Connecticut and Westchester County but a leader in the Northeast. The secret? A commitment to culture. "Everybody is hired from within, promoted from within," he explains. "You don't have outside cultures managing your people. That's when you start failing."

That philosophy extended to every acquisition. When Bobby bought County Line Nissan in 2022, he turned around a store that had never cracked the top 30 in the Boston Region. Within four months, it hit #1. Shortly after, he purchased a Toyota store in Watertown that he identified as having tremendous potential. He was right, and within the first year, sales nearly tripled. It was a dramatic turnaround, the likes which are rarely seen in the auto industry.

But it wasn't just about numbers. It was about methodical growth. "Over the years I've seen businesses overextend" he says. "You grow too fast, and you outpace your supply line."

So when the Lexus and Chevrolet stores in New Haven became available, Bobby moved carefully. It took months of negotiation and planning before he closed on the dual-brand facility. The Lexus store was historic—it was one of the first in the country—and again, Crabtree saw tremendous potential. "It's a 65,000-square-foot building on 17 acres. That's something I always wanted." Expansion and renovation plans are already underway with architects and contractors working on final design plans.

He kept the existing team through the holidays, then began integrating his culture. "You don't walk in and fire everyone," he says. "You give people a chance. Most can adjust. And some become stars."

Today, Crabtree Motor Group includes five dealerships: Colonial Toyota, Crabtree Nissan, Crabtree Toyota, Crabtree Lexus, and Bobby Crabtree Chevrolet. All are within the same

primary market area—a strategic decision that allows shared marketing, personnel, and culture.

Family as Foundation

Bobby's family is deeply embedded in the business. His daughter Sarah, the eldest, runs marketing and customer relations for all five stores. She's not just a familiar face—she's a core part of the brand's identity, often the first point of contact when customers reach out with praise or a concern. She recently married Michael McCauley, who works in equities in New York City.

Then there's Morgan, an attorney specializing in trust and estates law, who recently welcomed her first child. Her husband, Jack Fox, is another key player, overseeing the used car operations—a role Bobby emphasizes as vital to the group's financial health. Unlike new cars, which generally hold steady until the end of the model year, used cars depreciate every day, making every buying decision critical. A mistake on a used car — overpaying even slightly — can turn into a real financial loss, and repeated mistakes can compound quickly. At the same time, Bobby points out, with that kind of daily risk also comes daily opportunity: when properly managed, the used car department can be a strong profit center. That's why it takes someone sharp and experienced to run it — and Jack's definitely that guy."

His daughter Emily is an analyst at a hedge fund in Greenwich. While not directly involved in the business, she brings a sharp financial lens to the family. Maggie, a student at Syracuse University, is pursuing a degree in nursing. The youngest children, Michael and Katie, are twins—Michael plays Division I football at Bucknell University, and Katie attends St. Lawrence University, where she competes on the equestrian team.

And behind him, as always, is his wife of 35 years, Carolyn. More than a housewife, she raised six children while remaining deeply active in charity work. She also lends her talents to interior design and project management across the dealerships and their broader commercial and personal ventures.

"My greatest accomplishments are my children," Bobby says. "Running a dealership and raising a family aren't that different—you've got to care about your people, you've got to stay involved, and you've got to mean what you say."

The Culture Carried by People

The Crabtree philosophy isn't just preserved through family—it lives in the people who've committed decades to the business. Many team members have been with the company for 20, 30, even 35 years, a testament to a culture built on loyalty, mutual respect, and shared purpose.

One of Bobby's defining strategies is to scale the business without compromising that culture. When expanding to new locations like Crabtree Lexus, he brings trusted employees from existing stores to lead and mentor. Rather than replacing staff, he invests in new hires while empowering veterans to help onboard them. "It reinforces growth from within and loyalty," he says. While this approach may cost more initially, it results in stronger teams—more capable, more committed, and more aligned with the company's values.

His approach is practical and built on respect.
"I don't fire people easily or quickly" he says. "I give people an opportunity, talent is defined by god given ability combined with the right attitude.

The Blueprint

Management meetings are held daily. Department heads huddle at 10:30 a.m. sharp. Sales and service work hand in hand—not in silos. "The number one killer of morale is drama," Bobby says. "So we cut it out. We hold people accountable. But we also listen."

Bobby practices what he calls management by walking around, talking to customer throughout the dealership, especially in the service waiting area.

He pays attention to the small things. How clean is the car during delivery? Are the keys easy to find? Did the customer feel seen? "Our prep department can make or break the experience," he says.

The stakes are high. With a business now spanning five rooftops, Bobby admits he's had to learn how to let go. "You have to replace yourself, then train the next person to replace themselves. That's how you scale and keep your culture intact."

More Than a Business

To Bobby, a car dealership is more than inventory and sales goals. It's community. It's relationships. It's knowing that when an employee walks out the door in the morning, someone is watching them leave and rooting for their success. "You keep that in mind, you'll run a better business," he says.

So while the logos on the buildings might read Toyota, Nissan, Lexus, or Chevrolet, the unifying brand is clear: it's Crabtree. It's a name that's been built over generations—not just in asphalt and signage, but in values, loyalty, and leadership.

As Bobby says: "We're not just number one in sales. We're number one in retention. And that's because our people don't want to leave. That's how you know you're doing it right."

And in the world of automotive retail, that might be the most important measure of all.