

Driving for success

Teamwork wins on the track
and in business



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By Eve Lazarus

WHEN CHRISTIAN CHIA makes a pitch to sell a car, he probably knows what he's talking about.

The Costco member is the president and CEO of the OpenRoad Auto Group, a Richmond, British Columbia-based company that operates 11 car dealerships around the metro Vancouver area, selling Lexus, Toyota, Audi, Mazda, BMW, Infiniti, Hyundai, Honda and Mini automobiles and racking up more than \$370 million in annual sales.

But when he's not in the office, Chia is in his race car, competing in up to seven races a year, including the Macau Grand Prix, the Formula 1 Singapore support race, the Porsche Carrera Cup Asia and, new to Canada this year, the Porsche Carrera Cup Canada, held in Montreal. That's him in his \$195,000 2012 Porsche GT3 Cup Car.

What has kept Chia coming back over 15 years is the thrill of speed, the crowds and the roar of the engines. "It is an experience that is really hard to understand until you've tried it," Chia tells *The Connection*.

Last year, Chia won the Asian GT4 championship, a notch or two below the Formula 1 series, the epitome of motor sports.

To prepare for races, which exert forces in

excess of 2.5 G's on his body, Chia runs most days and enters a couple of half marathons each year. Because he's not a guy who does things in half measures, he'll compete in the New York City Marathon in November, his first full 42 kilometre (26.2-mile) marathon.

To Chia, racing and his business are a shared philosophy—both are competitive, both require a team and he likes to win at both.

"I'm the driver behind the wheel, but there is a team behind me—a team manager, technicians, there's the whole logistics aspect of it for parts and tires, and then there's a lot of planning and preparation that goes into racing," he says. "Business is no different. To some degree I am the face of our business, but I have 550 OpenRoad associates and they are the strength behind our organization."

For the past two years, Aon Hewitt has rated OpenRoad among the top 10 employers in Canada. Its Lexus dealership is the largest in Canada in both size and volume.

"You have to have a goal, you have to have a vision that's compelling and you need growth," Chia says. "People want to be part of a success story, and that instills pride in an organization."

Last year Chia opened the most expensive dealership in the company's 34-year

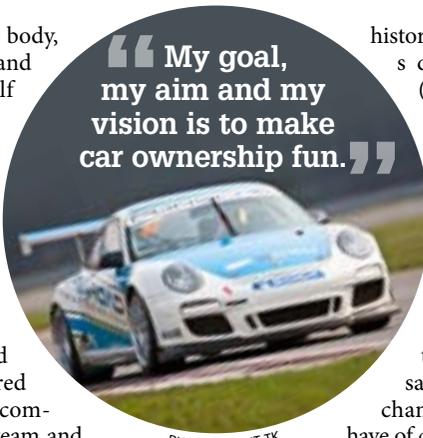


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“My goal, my aim and my vision is to make car ownership fun.”

history: a \$20 million, 9,200 square-metre (100,000-square-foot), LEED-certified facility. With its Lexus hybrid courtesy cars for clients, hybrid cars for staff use and scheduled shuttle service to local transit, it's not what you'd expect in the car sales industry—and that's the point, says Chia. He wants to change the image people have of car dealerships.

"There is still a stigma attached to this business. People don't enjoy car shopping, and you know what? They should," he says. "My goal, my aim and my vision is to make car ownership fun."

Chia, who is half Dutch and half Indonesian, was born in Amsterdam, grew up in Jakarta and came to Canada when he was around 10. He studied finance at the University of British Columbia, moved to Hong Kong and returned in 1998 to head up the family business, which at that time comprised four dealerships. While Chia runs the company, it is still very much a family business and involves his siblings, Marcel, Francis and Marya who live in Hong Kong, Singapore and New York.

"I would like to think that we have stimulated the market," he says. "That's good for the industry, and it's certainly good for the consumer." ☐

Eve Lazarus is a North Vancouver-based business reporter, freelance writer and author. See her blog at www.blog.evelazarus.com.

member profile

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Comments about Costco:

My kids like the free food samples, my wife likes the prices, and I like all the electronic gadgets. I also really like the big parking spaces, it's something that a lot of retailers including ourselves can learn from.

—Christian Chia

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