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‘The ultimate driving machine’ meets its counterpart in financial services

In today’s business environment, there are two things that keep customers committed to their banking partner – trust and personal service. For the Callari Auto Group, owner of BMW of Darien, Mini of Fairfield County and Volvo of Westport, a 34-year relationship with its personal banker provides the financial support and advice this business needs to grow in good times and bad.

Since 1976, Felix Callari (d. March 2008) had relied on his “personal friend and banker,” Rey Giallongo, for financing and other business banking needs. At that time Callari was Giallongo’s first corporate client and over the years they became close friends.

Giallongo, executive vice president of business banking and wealth management at First County Bank, was first introduced to Callari in 1976, when Giallongo worked at Union Trust Company. Callari first started working with Union Trust in 1964 when he needed a \$5,000 loan to purchase a gas station/auto repair business on E. Main Street in Stamford. The rest is Callari history.



(l. to r.) Charles Napolitano, vice president and director of operations at Callari Auto Group, Paula Callari, president of Callari Auto Group and daughter of the company’s founder, and Rey Giallongo, executive vice president of business banking and wealth management at First County Bank, taken at BMW of Darien located at 140 Ledge Rd. in Darien, Conn

Since 1976, Giallongo has been working with the Callari family during every stage of the company’s growth; including the recently completed multi-million-dollar renovation of its BMW dealership located at 140 Ledge Rd. in Darien, Conn.

“Our business has always been about personal service in a family environment,” said Paula Callari, president of Callari Auto Group and daughter of the company’s founder. “The people at First County Bank know the community. They know the people who live here and who own businesses here. Rey looks beyond the numbers. He looks at a company’s track record and its potential for growth. And when Rey moved from a large super regional bank to First County in 2002, we moved our business with him.”

“As my dad always told us, ‘If you think there is something more important than the customer, think again.’ It’s our philosophy here at Callari, and Rey Giallongo and his team at First County Bank believe in it too,” added Callari.

“Felix liked dealing with friends in his business. He looked to build a personal

relationship with his customers and with me,” said Giallongo in describing how their relationship lasted so long. “It is a rare thing in today’s banking environment. And our friendship expanded to Felix’s immediate and extended Callari Auto Group family – very unusual for a banking relationship.”

Paula Callari started working in the family business in 1989 after a stint selling insurance. She started in the service department and moved into sales after six months. She took a 10-month ownership training course at the National Automobile Dealers Association and started to share overall business responsibility with her father in 1991. Her sister, Flavia Callari, is vice president of marketing for the Callari Auto Group. And their mother, Sylvia Callari, remains involved in the business as executive vice president and majority shareholder.

While being friends with the owners of a business certainly helps solidify a banking relationship, what really helps grow the Callari Auto Group account is the personal service and performance it receives from the banking team.

Recently, Volvo of Westport moved its operating account to First County from another bank because, “First County Bank is going to be there through thick and thin. Our money is secure in this 159 year old institution. It is a solid, well run, conservative bank. “We also like the fact we’re not being nickel and dimed with hidden fees and other costs,” explained Paula Callari. “Callari Auto Group actually earns interest on its money being held at First County Bank versus other banks that eat up any interest earned with service fees.”

And when it comes to personal service and performance for the Callari dealerships, Charles Napolitano, vice president and director of operations at Callari Auto Group, leads the cause.

“Having been in the automotive business my entire career and for 16 years here at Callari, I’ve worked with several large money center banks. It is often difficult to do business with a large commercial bank,” explained Napolitano. “First County Bank is a hometown bank and we are on a first name basis with our bankers. Rey, Dick (Richard Taber, First County Bank CEO) and Tom (Bartram, First County Bank COO) are just fantastic. You’re dealing with people, not computers and pencil pushers who don’t know who you are. These guys are friends.

“The goal behind building this new BMW complex was to provide unparalleled service and a comfortable environment for our customers and employees,” added Napolitano. “Felix expected the people who spent their hard earned money within his dealerships to be taken care of like family. And it’s that same treatment we receive from Rey and his team at First County Bank that keeps us coming back.”

In addition to funding BMW of Darien renovations, First County Bank helped Callari Auto Group purchase the land and building that became Mini of Fairfield County in 2002 located at 1259 E. Main Street. And back in 1980, while Giallongo was at Union Trust, he helped fund Callari’s purchase of Volvo of Westport, located at 556 Post Road East.

“It is because of good customers like Callari Auto Group that community banks like First County flourish. We live and work here and often see our clients at public events,” added Giallongo. Giallongo is responsible for business development and management of the bank’s portfolio of commercial and business relationships, oversees the bank’s trust and investment group, and now also has information technology reporting to him.

“I reach out to our clients on a regular basis. And because we have personal relationships, they are comfortable enough to call me anytime to ask a question or just to say hello. It’s that type of personal relationship that keeps me motivated to help my customers grow their business. If they succeed, so does the bank.”

First County Bank, headquartered in Stamford, Conn., is an independent mutual community bank with 15 branches in Stamford, Greenwich, Darien, New Canaan, Norwalk and Westport offering deposit products, mortgages, trust and investment services, business banking services and online banking. First County Bank has assets in excess of \$1.2 billion. For additional information, visit www.firstcountybank.com.

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