From UConn to Ford Motor Company: Engineering Grad Reaches Marketing Heights

Growing up in Manchester, Connecticut during the 1920s and '30s, Frank Zimmerman never dreamed he would reach the highest echelons of U.S. auto giant Ford Motor Company. Yet, armed with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Connecticut, Mr. Zimmerman found his engineering training amply prepared him for the challenges of introducing Americans to some of the most legendary automobiles ever produced in the U.S.

Mr. Zimmerman attended the University of Connecticut at Storrs during World War II. At the time, he recalls, there were just four engineering students in his senior class. The small class sizes ensured each student received lots of individual attention, whether in lectures or labs.

Like many students, Mr. Zimmerman worked throughout his undergraduate years. At the Whitney Cafeteria, he and his SAE fraternity brothers performed various functions; Mr. Zimmerman himself mopped floors and ran the dishwashing machine. He recalls the entire town had significantly more open space in the 1940s, so during the winter months, he occasionally would ski across campus to his business classes, then head over to Horsebarn Hill for a leisurely post-class schuss.

It was during his senior year that Mr. Zimmerman began to consider his career options. Just as today, in the '40s, companies sent recruiters to the UConn campus to interview graduating engineers.

One of them, recalls Mr. Zimmerman, was Leander Hamilton McCormick-Goodheart of Ford Motor Company. "The Dean of Engineering, Dr. Lampe, suggested I speak with Mr. McCormick-Goodheart. When I saw the Lincoln Continental he was driving, outside the window, I said I'd like to go to work for Ford. A month later, I received an offer to join the Student Engineering program at $185/month. The Student Engineer program [discontinued after one year] was a complete orientation of every industrial process in the Rouge Plant, as well as an introduction to all the various other aspects of the Company," he explains.

Two weeks after graduating, he hitchhiked to Detroit to start work at Ford. He slept his first night on the front steps of the Dearborn Town Hall.

Over the course of eighteen months, Mr. Zimmerman and the other Student Engineers were immersed in 2-to-6 week, in-depth training segments that introduced each phase of the operation, including assembly lines, rolling mills, tool and die making, the blacksmith shop, test track, assembly line, financial analysis, and purchasing. A year into his training period, while learning to melt raw iron ore with "coke breeze" in an open hearth furnace at Ford's steel plant, Mr. Zimmerman met a new trainee who was destined to become both a valued friend and a U.S. auto icon: Lee Iacocca. The two, both young bachelors, learned the ropes at Ford, explored night life in Dearborn and metro Detroit, double dated, and forged a strong personal bond that continued throughout their careers at Ford and remains intact today.

Ford invited 21-year old Frank to join its sales office in New York City as a sales trainee in the truck department. New York was a revelation for the Connecticut Yankee, and it was here that he met his late wife, Eleanor, who worked in the Ford Regional Office.

In 1952, Mr. Zimmerman returned to Ford's Dearborn headquarters as a truck sales engineer. A succession of positions followed, involving supervisory, sales, promotion and training responsibilities. As Car Marketing Manager in the late '50s, Mr. Zimmerman supervised all advertising, promotion and new model introductions, and he established several Ford Marketing Institutes around the world to train retail salesmen. Later, as Special Vehicles Manager, he was involved in reintroducing Ford to the racecar circuit: Grand Prix (Formula 1), Le Mans, Indianapolis 500, NASCAR, and drag racing. Among Ford's introductions were the Lotus-Ford Indy car and the Ford GT40 Le Mans car.

A series of executive marketing positions ensued, in the Ford Division and with Lincoln-Mercury. As General Marketing Manager and General Sales Manager, Mr. Zimmerman helped introduce, merchandise and advertise the Ford Mustang, Mercury Cougar, Lincoln Mark III, Ford Torino and Ford LTD, among other models. During this time, his deft salesmanship earned him a lengthy "day in the life" story in Sales Management magazine (October 1, 1966; pp. 48-56).

In 1974, as Executive Director of Marketing Staff, Mr. Zimmerman oversaw corporate advertising, all Marketing Institute training, and market research in the U.S. and abroad. He retired from Ford in 1977 to pursue various interests, including real estate sales, an office supply store and property management - as well as more leisurely activities.

His training at UConn, says Zimmerman, was an asset in his business career. "An engineering background has been ideal in solving individual problems, some that are done by the day, and some by the hour. The engineering background is ideal in preparing for a variety of challenges."

Mr. Zimmerman died in January 2006.