

# BUILDING LOYALTY FROM THE GROUND UP

*Ford Rethinks It's Dealership Experience*

*Signature* sat down for an exclusive interview with Elena Ford, the Chief Dealer Engagement Officer for the Blue Oval, and great great granddaughter of Ford Motor Company founder, Henry Ford, to understand how the brand is redefining the dealership's role through its ambitious Signature 2.0 programme, a global initiative designed to transform dealerships into welcoming, hospitality-led spaces that strengthen trust, deepen loyalty, and reinforce Ford's long-term commitment to customers.



Exclusivity in the motor industry rarely arrives with fanfare. More often, it presents itself in fleeting windows between tightly scheduled engagements, where the real conversations happen away from the spotlight. Our meeting with Elena Ford, Chief Dealer Engagement Officer for Ford Motor Company, was one such moment. Granted exclusively to *Signature* during her recent visit to South Africa, our discussion took place shortly after Ford South Africa's annual dealer conference at the Sandton Convention Centre. Joining her was Neale Hill, President and CEO of Ford South Africa, whose leadership has helped position the local operation as one of Ford's most strategically important global markets.



The purpose of Elena's visit was not merely ceremonial. Ford is in the midst of reimagining one of the most fundamental elements of its business - the dealership itself. Known as Signature 2.0, the programme represents a comprehensive rethink of how customers interact with Ford at the most critical point of contact. It is a recognition that while vehicles may evolve through electrification and connectivity, the human experience surrounding ownership remains just as important.

And perhaps nowhere is that more relevant than here.

#### **GLOBAL STRATEGY ON A SOUTH AFRICAN STAGE**

South Africa occupies a unique position within Ford's global footprint. The Silverton Manufacturing Plant

in Pretoria produces up to 200,000 Rangers annually, supplying customers across multiple continents while simultaneously serving local demand. The Ranger is a global pillar for Ford, making South Africa far more than a regional outpost. It is a cornerstone of Ford's manufacturing and customer ecosystem.

Signature 2.0 arrives at a time when customer expectations are evolving rapidly. It represents the most significant update to Ford's retail experience since the Trustmark programme was introduced more than two decades ago, reflecting the brand's response to new competitors, changing customer behaviour, and the growing importance of seamless physical and digital interaction.



Elena was quick to contextualise the scale of change.

“We redesigned facilities about 20 years ago,” she explained. “At that point, there really wasn’t even an iPhone.”

That simple observation underscores just how dramatically the retail landscape has shifted. Today’s customers arrive at dealerships armed with research, comparisons, and expectations shaped by experiences far beyond the automotive sector.

“We know that people do about 40 to 50% of their research online,” Elena told me. “But they still want to come into the store. They want to take the vehicle for a test drive. They want to talk to someone. It’s really about deepening that relationship.”

That relationship is central to Ford’s strategy, and Signature 2.0 is designed to

facilitate vehicle purchases and foster lasting loyalty throughout the ownership journey.

#### **HOSPITALITY FIRST**

The philosophy behind Signature 2.0 becomes immediately apparent when stepping into one of the new-generation dealerships. I experienced this firsthand during my visit to Ford Roodepoort, one of the first facilities locally to adopt the concept.

The traditional dealership environment, often defined by desks, partitions, and a clear separation between customer and salesperson, has been replaced by something more open and intuitive. A central hospitality hub welcomes customers as they enter, encouraging exploration rather than directing movement.

“The idea is when you walk into the store, it’s more of a hospitality

experience,” Elena explained. “Like you’re walking into someone’s home. We want to make it warm and inviting.”

This hospitality-led approach forms the foundation of Signature 2.0, alongside three additional core principles – “Sales and Service Anywhere”, “Discover Ford”, and “Operations Excellence”. Together, they create an environment that strengthens emotional engagement and supports meaningful interactions between customers and dealership staff.

One of the most significant operational changes lies in breaking down the traditional barriers between sales and service.

“We call it sales and service anywhere,” Elena said. “We want customers to feel like they can come in, sit down, have a conversation, and build a relationship. Because once they buy the vehicle, we want

them to come back and service it as well.”

This continuity reinforces trust and strengthens long-term retention. The dealership becomes not just a point of sale, but a hub for ongoing engagement.

Equally important is the shift in how customers discover the brand.

“In the past, it was very transactional,” Elena reflected. “You come in, you buy the car, and you leave. Now, we want customers to discover Ford. We want them to understand our history, our future, and what the brand represents.”

This includes curated displays of accessories, merchandise, and brand storytelling elements that transform the dealership into a space where customers can

engage with Ford beyond the vehicle itself.

Neale Hill emphasised why this transformation is particularly relevant in the South African context.

“There’s been a dramatic change in the competitive environment,” he told me. “We have to offer a distinctive customer experience that differentiates the Ford brand. It starts with that welcoming when customers walk into the dealership. They shouldn’t feel intimidated. It should be hospitality first.”

His point speaks to a broader industry reality. As new competitors enter the market and customer choice expands, experience becomes a defining differentiator.

Signature 2.0 is Ford’s response to that challenge.

The rollout itself is deliberately measured. Already, six dealerships have made the transition, with another five currently in the process of aligning with the Signature 2.0 standard by the end of 2026, with broader adoption continuing beyond that timeframe.

“The investment we’re seeing from our dealer partners is a strong endorsement of the Ford brand,” Neale explained. “These are long-term commitments made by independent business owners who believe in Ford and have confidence in the strength and future of our products.”

That confidence is already translating into tangible results globally, with early adopters reporting increased customer engagement and positive feedback.

But what struck me most during my visit to Ford Roodepoort was something less measurable. It was the atmosphere. Customers moved freely through the space, interacting naturally with staff. There was no pressure, just engagement.

In an era defined by rapid technological advancement, it would be easy to assume that the future of automotive retail exists entirely online. Yet Signature 2.0 acknowledges a deeper truth. The dealership remains one of the most powerful touchpoints in shaping customer perception.

Ford’s decision to invest in transforming that experience speaks volumes about its long-term vision, not only globally but here in South Africa. With the Ranger continuing to roll off the Silverton production line in volumes that serve markets worldwide, South Africa’s importance within Ford’s ecosystem remains undeniable.

Signature 2.0 reinforces that commitment. It goes beyond a new dealership design to reflect a shift in mindset, placing customer experience at the centre of Ford’s retail strategy.

If my conversation with Elena and Neale concluded, it became abundantly clear that Ford is not simply modernising its dealerships, it is rebuilding the foundation of customer loyalty – from the ground up. 📍

