

Vertu Motors CEO becomes undercover boss in TV mission to check out company

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The boss of one of the North East's largest companies has gone undercover in his own business as part of an ITV reality show.

Robert Forrester is a frequent visitor to Vertu Motors' 150-plus car dealerships around the country in his role as the company's CEO.

But as part of the ITV show Undercover Big Boss – due to shown on Thursday – he dons a wig and other elements of disguise and pretends to be a university lecturer from Aberystwyth who is checking out potential careers for the post-Covid world.

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Having normally been at home taking charge of the finances and strategy of the £3bn-turnover business, Mr Forrester instead has to valet, service and try to sell cars as he gets to see the everyday workings of his company at first hand.

After growing a beard to complete his disguise, Mr Forrester admitted that the experience was very much out of his comfort zone.

But he said he was pleased to see the workings of his company at close hand and was impressed by the staff he worked with, while posing as someone with no knowledge of the motor trade.

He said: "It was quite difficult because you're concerned someone's going to spot you and I was having to pretend to be someone else. It was a mental contortion but it was very enjoyable in terms of what I saw.

"The business was in good shape. There was some fantastic people who are trying 100% to give the best service to our customers. There were a few crinkles too so I downloaded my thoughts each night and when I got back I called a board meeting to discuss them."

Mr Forrester admitted he was not a "natural salesman", but said he enjoyed a day spent valeting cars – despite rarely being seen out of a suit during his normal work days.

The show – which has changed its name since its switch from Channel 4 to ITV – has been on air in the UK since 2014, as well as having versions in the USA and other countries. It sees chief executives and company founders don disguises to see how their company operates without the normal deference that bosses receive.

Mr Forrester was one of the founders of Vertu in 2006, having previously been finance director of North East motor chain Reg Vardy. He has helped the Team Valley-based company to become the fifth largest automotive retailer in the UK, employing 6,000 people.

He said Vertu was thriving despite tough conditions in the automotive sector and was recruiting for jobs at its Gateshead headquarters.

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