

New MD for Nissan South Africa

Julio Panama, Managing Director of Nissan South Africa (Nissan SA) has been appointed Vice President Marketing and Sales at the global company's Nissan Mexico operations. This follows the completion of Panama's four-and-a-half year foreign services assignment (FSA), which he began in South Africa in November 2003.

Taking over his position in South Africa will be Mike Whitfield, who is simultaneously completing his FSA in Finland.

Panama joined Nissan SA from Nissan Mexico where he was Director of Purchasing. His tenure at Nissan SA coincided with the introduction of the global revamped brand and visual identity programme, a uniform Nissan dealer mark worldwide, which was part of the Nissan Revival Plan (NRP) and instrumental in NML's financial turnaround. He led the negotiations, as well as securing the X90 project, which is to produce both a passenger vehicle and bakkie under the Renault-Nissan Alliance formed in 1999 - at Nissan SA's Rosslyn manufacturing plant.

During his term in South Africa, Panama gave his full support to the concept of cross functionality, where teams from different departments worked together to define problems, discuss solutions and exchange knowledge - a practice which was introduced by Nissan CEO and President Carlos Ghosn as part of Nissan's recovery plan.

Panama also impressed on employees the importance of detail simulation and scenario mapping as well as the notion of 'frugality', a NML-imported buzzword emphasising cost-effective practices in the workplace.

"While I am looking forward to the challenge of a new position, it is with a tinge of sadness that I leave Nissan SA. As an automotive manufacturer, faced with the pressures that are peculiar to our industry, we had both exciting and turbulent times," said Panama.

He emphasised that the change of leadership at Nissan SA would not change the direction of the company, which remains fully committed to continued investment in South Africa.

Said Colin Dodge, Chairman Nissan Global Overseas Markets (GOM): "Our Tokyo-based parent company is excited about the opportunities in South Africa, which it regards as a key manufacturing facility. In keeping with our strategy, 2008 will see the launch of a number of new models, both imported and locally-manufactured."

Projects are in place to the value of R1 billion investment to the expansion of the Rosslyn assembly plant, in preparation for future Nissan products and Alliance projects. Not only does this signal the return of double shift production but it will also create much-needed employment opportunities in the area.

Panama said that, although 2007 had been a particularly difficult year for the automotive industry – new car sales fell in the

face of rising interest rates plus seeing many new entrants to the market - he was confident that a recovery is in sight.

“Our sales suffered a 7.3% drop to 47,972 during 2007 but we have started the year positively,” said Panama, who is pleased to be leaving on a high note, following Nissan Qashqai's nomination for the South African Car of the Year Award.

Panama, who is returning to his native country, assumes his new position in Mexico in April.

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