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Tales of the Touareg and other adventures in branding

By Charles Warnock

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You're not likely to see a Volkswagen in the winner's circle at Daytona or Indianapolis. But if there were competition called the Brand-Building 500, you would find a Volkswagen in the winner's circle, year after year. Everyone knows the touchstones of branding - creating value, consistency, visibility and loyalty. However, like auto racing, these fundamentals are easy to talk about, but a little more challenging to execute. Nearly anyone can steer a car around a track. But winning consistently against fierce competition in a variety of locations and conditions requires considerable skill.

Few companies are more skilled than Volkswagen at building customer loyalty. Owners become emotionally invested in their cars, invent pet names for them and treat them like extended family members. In addition to automobile devotees, the company has many more admirers who are fans of the brand. Their irreverent image and clever television ad campaigns speak to young buyers today with a message that's consistent with the one used to sell Bugs to their parents 30 years ago. If you're a hip, free-spirited kind of person who wants a car with personality, come join us. Among marketers, the company's promotional prowess is legendary:

The last original VW Bug, forerunner of today's modernized Beetle, rolled off the production line in 2003 - the last of 21,529,464 sold worldwide since the 1930s. In addition to dozens of Bug restoration and repair books, several compilations of VW's popular print ads have been published.

A "Transparent Factory" in Dresden, Germany features glass walls that enable residents to witness the manufacture of VW luxury sedans. Finished vehicles are displayed in a glass tower before being delivered to their new owners.

In 1973-74, the company sold 30,000 VW "Things" - a re-badged German military vehicle that looks very much like the offspring of a jeep and a dumpster - to enthusiastic U.S. buyers.

In fact, even as Europe's largest automaker, VW has been successful in defining a sort of exclusive club for younger, educated drivers. Many of these buyers start with a Jetta or a Beetle before moving on to the company's more luxurious offerings.

And now comes the Touareg, VW's entry into the luxury SUV market. Touareg is apparently a first-rate SUV with what USA Today calls "style, grace and growl." But Touareg? Come on. Passat is an odd name, but "Touareg" sounds like something that needs calamine lotion.

Worship me or die

Perhaps Touareg has some poetic meaning in Slovakia, where it is built. Or perhaps the industry is simply running out of good car names. It's a good bet that if you looked through enough sci-fi novels, you would encounter an evil warlord called Touareg the Terrible who aims to enslave a galaxy or kidnap a lovely Empress. What's next? Ming the Mercury? The Plymouth Vader? On the other hand, a "Worship Me or Die!" ad campaign for the Touareg would be a refreshing change of pace from those

friendly, self-deprecating Beetle commercials.

On the plus side, it's a pretty safe bet that Touareg doesn't mean "won't go" in Spanish and won't offend Wiccans, Jaycees or the Saharan nomads the vehicle is said to be named for. But VW could have accomplished that by calling it the Type 181, which is what the Thing was called during its hitch in the military. Perhaps Volkswagen thought that all the good rugged locale names, like Tahoe and the Santa Fe, were taken. The VW "Peoria" or "Levittowner" just wouldn't have the same caché.

Likewise, many of the good predatory animal names are already taken. Some of the best mythical beasts, like the Thunderbird and Phoenix are also spoken for. Few people would be willing to take on a 60-month loan for a GMC Grackle, Mitsubishi Gerbil or Toyota Trout.

Perhaps automakers can enter brand partnerships with corporate sponsors, as some sports and entertainment facilities have done. The introduction of a Nissan Nike or Plymouth Viagra may not cause much of a stir at this point. With bland brands like Vitara, Spectra, Elantra and Optima becoming more common, one could assume that there are even worse nameplates yet to come. In just a few years, all the good brand names could be taken and we'll begin to see automakers settling for second-tier names:

- 15: Volvo Vanilla
14. Nissan Eeyore
13. Oldsmobile Earlybird
12. Lincoln Pimpmobile
11. Chevrolet Groin
10. Kia Uvula
9. Pontiac Schmontiac
8. BMW Strudel
7. Subaru Musty
6. Honda Pretense
5. Isuzu Achoo
4. VW Vin Diesel
3. Mercury Mongrel
2. Plymouth Scrota

1. Hyundai Albundai (for drivers who are married with children)

Another possibility is for automakers to trade on the success of celebrities who have already built winning brands. I would expect that the Cadillac Sinatra would be popular with both older buyers and younger fans of the legendary singer. The Mazda Beyonce would be sleek, fun to drive, have a great sound system and a built-in celebrity endorsement. And it's hard to imagine that a limited Elvis or Earnhardt edition of any pickup truck wouldn't drive sales in the South.

Passat? Bless you!

Elvis and evil warlords aside, the bottom line is brand equity, and it doesn't really matter whether Touareg is a successful sub-branding strategy. Even if individual VW models have names that sound like a sneeze or a rash, buyers seem to focus on the magic of the corporate brand.

Mere marketing mortals should probably assume that VW's positioning, promotion and publicity formula for the Touareg is on target. The vehicle probably will garner its own cult following, and

Touareg clubs, meetings and Web pages will follow. But it's not because of the name. It's because the company has consistently excelled in developing the awareness, recognition and loyalty necessary to build a premium brand. After all, any company that has taken the purchasing decision from "Which car should I buy?" to "Which VW should I buy?" deserves the checkered flag.

Co-Branding For More Traffic

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The opportunity to promote your web site on the internet grows daily. Unfortunately, so do the number of sites that compete for product placement and web traffic. As a response to this increased competition, many savvy marketers are turning to co-branding to provide them with an edge over their competition. By participating in co-branding programs, these web marketers can provide more tools, resources and "sticky" content than their competitors.

A co-brand program is usually an arrangement where a web page, company, or organization allows a licensee or participant to include the licensee's logo or brand on the product offered by the licensor. The benefit to the licensee is increased brand exposure, and the ability to offer a product that would otherwise be unavailable to their clients. The benefit to the licensor can be increase advertising revenue, or in many cases on the internet, increased web traffic. An example of this type of co-branding would be syndicated stock ticker that could be posted on your site, and branded with your

logo. An example of this can be found at the Wall Street Trader Co-brand site <http://www.wstraders.com/index.cfm?CobrandApp=1>

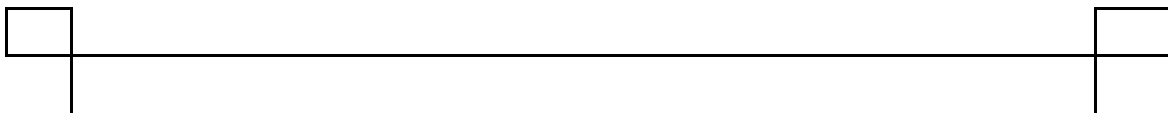
The opportunities to co-brand on the internet are expanding from content to actual software and products. IP Ware real estate software <http://www.freetrainer.com/cobrand.htm> offers free co-branding and co-branded web links on the software's start page so that consumers are exposed to co-branding every time they start the software. The Internet Toolpad <http://www.itoolpad.com/> will actually insert your logo into a host of freeware for a small charge. There are also a number of organizations that will accept co-branding in exchange for cross promotion and increased traffic.

Regardless of the type of co-branding, the benefit in increased traffic and site "stickiness" is apparent. By using the branding and promotional resources on the internet wisely, the internet marketer can offer more options, better solutions, and more attractive content than their competition.

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