

Test drives make gains in marketing clout

Mary Connelly | |

Automotive News | 1:00 am, October 16, 2006

Consumer test drive events are moving to the center of automotive marketing.

Ride-and-drive programs often are more costly than traditional media advertising. But shoppers who test drive a vehicle are more likely to consider its brand, industry analysts say. Driving events also are a powerful way for car companies to connect with current owners, the analysts add.

"Ride-and-drive is a fabulous way to do conquest sales," said Lou Bitonti, a marketing consultant and former global event manager for the Chrysler group.

Potential buyers who test drive a car or truck are three times more likely than other consumers to consider buying it, Bitonti told *Automotive News*.

Camp Jeep

Bitonti left the Chrysler group in September after 22 years with the company. A dozen years ago, he created Camp Jeep, a three-day event for Jeep owners.

"You've got to keep that human connection and passion point," Bitonti said. "At Camp Jeep, owners were taken aback because they were able to meet the people behind the brand, such as the designers.

"We gave them an opportunity to see the vehicles in real-life situations and had product specialists there to answer questions," said Bitonti, who now heads LD3 Event Management LLC in suburban Detroit. "We saw the results."

Test drives help reverse consumers' false impressions of Jeep vehicles, says John Plecha, director of Jeep marketing and global communications.

"We have some research that says once they drive a Jeep, they feel better about it," Plecha says. "They understand the ride better."

Jeep is selling a new generation of less-rugged vehicles, such as the Patriot and Compass crossovers. Too often, Plecha says, the perception of consumers is that Jeeps are "harsh" off-roaders.

"They are great on-road machines now," he says. "Our dealers do a great job of test driving. If we can show what our vehicle can do, it is invaluable."

The Chrysler group this month began offering test drives of Chrysler, Jeep and Dodge vehicles at 12 U.S. megachurches. The program is a way to reach black consumers, the company says.

At the same time, Chrysler is sponsoring a gospel concert tour this fall by singer Patti LaBelle, who will perform in the churches.

The church ride-and-drives are likely to succeed, says Andrea Hoffman, president of Hoffman Management Inc., a marketing and consulting company in Hamburg, N.J. She formerly worked at advertising agencies whose clients included BMW of North America and Mercedes-Benz USA.

Hoffman's company specializes in reaching affluent minority consumers. Ride-and-drives and other event-marketing activities resonate with ethnic groups that value communal efforts, she says.

High costs

Consumer ride-and-drives can be "hideously expensive," says Jeremy Anwyl, president of industry researcher Edmunds.com.

"They can easily get to \$10, \$20, \$30 million with a track and competitive vehicles (going to) five or 10 cities," Anwyl says. "On a cost-per-impression basis, it is very expensive."

But the cost isn't stopping automakers from expanding their ride-and-drive programs.

In 2007, Hyundai Motor America plans to conduct 50 test drive programs, says spokesman Chris Hosford. That schedule compares with about 30 programs this year, Hosford says.

At Volkswagen of America Inc., marketers rely on targeted test drives. Mass-market ride-and-drives are "very cost-prohibitive," says VW spokesman Keith Price.


VW favors ride-and-drives at events such as Water Fest, which drew 20,000 owners of VW vehicles and classic cars to Englishtown, N.J., last July. Those owners tend to influence other consumers, the company says.

Similarly, a month before the market launch of the Eos coupe in early September, VW owners received an e-mail blast promoting a dealership test drive program.

"We can't afford to conquest nearly 71 percent of our annual volume anymore," says Kerri Martin, VW's director of brand innovation. "We've got enthusiastic owners to build off of. Why not take advantage of that and really solidify and cement that relationship?"

You may e-mail Mary Connelly at mconnelly@crain.com



 zoom

The Chrysler group's Camp Jeep gives consumers a chance to drive Jeeps in real-life situations and meet designers.

PRINTED FROM: <http://www.autonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20061016/SUB/61011024/1018/1018&refsect=1018&template=printart>

Entire contents ©2006 [Crain Communications, Inc.](#)
