

COLUMN: As The Saws Turn

TITLE: Design: The Passion is in the Eyes of the Beholder

My son and I spent the entire day together on Saturday. The plan was for us to go out and test drive the new '05 Ford Mustang GT and Pontiac GTO. We're not in the market to buy, just to drive.

I have never been a huge fan of the Mustang, especially the most recent few design iterations. But I happen to think that J. Mays and the Ford design team hit a grand slam with this new design. It brings back the very best of the late 60's/early 70's designs and integrates them with the best of new automotive technology. I think it's gorgeous. I saw five of them at the recent auto show and wanted to drive the GT.

The new Pontiac GTO, on the other hand, is just not there for me. The name conjures up the beautiful cars of the mid-late 60's, but this version is way too bland for me. It doesn't draw out the passion in me that the Mustang does. It has no connection to the previous designs, and, in my mind, makes no strong statement about automotive design today. It may be the better performer of the two cars (and I don't know that for a fact), but the looks just don't draw my attention. Purely on my reaction to the designs, I'll take the Mustang.

One of our sales executives is preparing for a big presentation to a new prospective client. In the process, we have asked two designers to provide us with designs. We intend to present both designs to the prospect. The first designer, a guy we use on a regular basis, created a suitable design that meets all the requirements of the RFP. The second design, from a designer we have not worked with much, came almost as an after-thought. But when we opened his package, it just about took our breath away. It was gorgeous.

The interesting thing is that both designs solve the challenges presented by the prospect. Both designs fall within the budget we have been given. Both designs create an environment that will work on the show floor and will be efficient to set up and dismantle. But one has so much more visual impact than the other.

At least to us. But we're not the ones buying. We're the ones selling. What if the ones buying (the prospect) are blown away by the other design? Design is such a subjective thing. What is beautiful to me (a Mustang...) may be just plain ugly to you.

So our challenge is to attempt to take the requirements and desires of a prospective client, one that we may not know that well yet, and try to create a design that not only meets all of those requirements, but also has the impact on them to create a passionate, even emotional, connection. Those kinds of connections make selling it a whole lot easier.

Both the Mustang and GTO are decent cars, both perform very well, and both will be candidates for weekend racers and after-market modifications. Both names carry a strong cache and are well-documented in American automotive history. Both are in the same price range. But which one brings out the passion in you? Given the choice, which would you buy?

Do you think automotive design is a crap-shoot? Do they just dream up these designs to satisfy their own creative urges, or is there a more scientific approach to it? Perhaps lots of research on consumer buying behavior, target buying audiences, demographics and psychographics of the target purchaser, etc.? Then the designer takes that information and creates the design to meet those requirements. And if he hits it right, guys like me have to go drive it...and buy it.

So how do we insure we get a successful design in our industry, where in some cases the designer never even meets the prospective client, but relies on

information provided to him second or third hand? Seems like kind of a crap-shoot, doesn't it? Not if we do our homework, too. Before we even start the design process, what can we learn about our prospective client – both the individual and the company? What do we know about their culture, their history, and their people? What do we know about how they market – advertising, direct marketing, their website, etc? How do they present themselves in other venues?

What do we know about the personalities of the decision-makers? What is it that will evoke the positive reaction we want in them? How can we get this information and do our best to create a design that not only meets the specific requirements, but also draws out the emotional reaction in the buyers?

Getting the answers to these questions means doing more than just gathering demographic data. This is a whole new level of research...learning what makes our clients tick; what drives them; what they are passionate about. How can we connect our design and proposal to this passion and emotion?

This is the kind of research that must be done to improve our odds of winning in a competitive design situation. It makes us smarter about our prospective clients, and allows us to make smarter decisions about design, so it's not just a crap shoot. And so the client will buy as much on emotion as on fact. Kind of like me and a Mustang.

See you on the show floor.

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