



The Detroit News

Where the auto industry is headed

Your car is the message: So sexy beats utilitarian

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In times of crisis and uncertainty, America sees a strong resurgence of archetypal buying behavior and spending habits.



This behavior functions at three unique levels. The "reptilian brain," which is related to survival and reproduction, the "limbic brain," which is emotional and the "cortex," which is intelligent, rational and logical.

We are at a time when the return of the reptilian consumer is obvious. When the two World Trade Center towers fall, we buy a Hummer.

In times of confusion and uncertainty, customers are going to need and demand even stronger, more powerful and clear brands. Brands which respect their DNA -- or "secret code" -- are going to be successful. Brands which try everything and attempt to appeal to everyone are going to lose.

A Cadillac should be a Cadillac, not an almost-Mercedes or almost-BMW. By recapturing their "archetypal identity," seemingly lost brands will regain market share.

In the future, consumers are going to need three basic attributes to buy a car.

First, a very strong identity is paramount. From a distance, people should be able to decipher and easily recognize it. If you need to read the badge up close, the brand has not been successful. There are numerous examples of automotive models with strong identities: PT Cruiser, Hummer.

A very clear message is also critical. A car is a message. What is the message? I'm a soccer mom (minivan). I'm looking for a girl (red convertible, mid-life crisis). In times of crisis, more than ever, the message should be reptilian and survival. For example, the Hummer (I'm ready to fight). The PT Cruiser (don't mess with me -- Al Capone).

Finally, a successful brand must deliver consistency. All of the elements of the brand -- the design, the dealership, service, commercials -- should reinforce the message and the identity.

Most consumers do not just buy a car, they purchase a particular model to belong to a group sharing the same identity (they tried that with Saturn).

People are tired of boring cars designed because of favorable trade agreements, advantageous currency exchange rates, or federal fuel economy requirements. Ford Motor Co. will not succeed by trying to make cars appealing only to the cortex. People are still in love with cars. The problem is that most of our cars are not in love with people (they are too cortex-boring). So we will see the return of the very sexy car.

Automotive designers are now working hard to get people to say WOW! I want this car! Why? I don't know and I don't need to know. I just want it.

This is where the future of cars is going in America. More reptilian sexy cars and trucks, not more boring, fuel-efficient small anonymous vehicles. Why? The reptilian always wins.

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE: Experts predict that consumer demands and market forces will reshape the automobile



This is a sketch of a possible future sports car aimed at the growing group of wealthy buyers. "The lines between what is luxurious and sporty will blur even more in the future," says Byron Fitzpatrick of Detroit's College for Creative Studies.

Visions of the cars of tomorrow

The automobile has come a long way since the late 1890s, when tillers and crank cases helped guide the "horseless carriage." Today, safety considerations, functional needs, comfort and environmental requirements help determine the styling of cars and trucks. The Detroit News asked Bryon Fitzpatrick, chairman of the Industrial Design Department and Transportation Design Program at Detroit's College for Creative Studies, to handicap where automotive design and styling are headed.



Trucks may become smaller, more compact and boast more functionality. This truck shows an exposed exoskeletal system, which is usually concealed but is designed to enhance safety and absorb more energy in a crash, creating another level of protection for passengers.



Dubbed the Ford Rasp, this concept is an effort to design an affordable roadster to appeal to younger car buyers. The vehicles utilize the like-body panels by swapping them end-to-end. The hood also functions as the trunk, and the driver and passenger side doors are interchangeable. It would be inexpensive to manufacture.



In the future, steering could be conducted by controls on the seat and not a steering wheel. Unitized seats may be more ergonomically appealing for drivers. Hand grips track backward and forward to control steering. Control arms pivot down to begin the driving countdown. An ejection handle located at the front of the seat sends control arms up to flank the backrest.



This is a vision of a compact car designed exclusively for the city and urban areas. It has been downsized to reflect the shrinking size of American families who no longer want or need vans, wagons and sport-utility vehicles. It will offer an attractive, value-oriented price.