

motoring



The ART of the SELL

A new book charts the progress of car advertising through the last century and reveals some intriguing trends, as **Georgia Lewis** reports

Car advertisements have always been aspirational, offering potential buyers an image and a lifestyle as well as transport. *Classic Cars: 100 Years Of Automotive Ads*, a chronological journey from 1900 to 1999, demonstrates that, while ad design has changed dramatically, the messages seldom have. "Buy our car for a glamorous, successful life!", "Buy our car for the latest technology!" and "Buy our car for value for money!" are, largely, how car makers have always sold their wares.

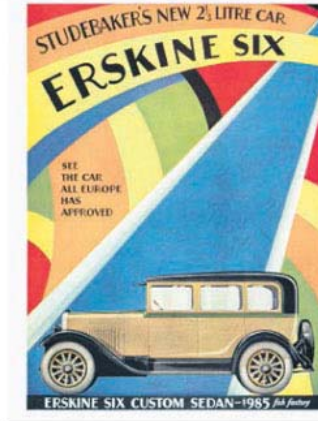
Until the end of the 1950s, photography was rarely used, the advertising agencies preferring photo-like art or, especially in the 1920s, design motifs of the time. The 1927 Studebaker Erskine Six ad features an art deco backdrop of primary colours, perhaps to detract from the fact that the car, in dull beige with dreary green stripes, was not the most thrilling design.

Other offerings showcase the beauty of the cars. The 1981 Ferrari 308 GTB ad and the 1960 "silver curve of success" campaign for the Ford Galaxie are two examples, albeit in different ways.

Car ads, continued on mo4 →

Illustration courtesy of Taschen Books

9 the number of seasons *Fantasy Island*, the 1970s TV show, ran for. The show famously starred the late Ricardo Montalban, who was also employed by Chrysler to endorse the Cordoba saloon. Montalban is fondly remembered for his pronunciation of 'soft Corinthian leather' in TV commercials for the car



A lack of political correctness is nothing new in car advertisements

→ Car ads, continued from mo1

With its clean, aerodynamic lines, the Ferrari makes a fussy background unnecessary, while the Galaxie, in all its fin-tastic glory, is set on a primary coloured 1960s abstract art motif.

Classic Cars also charts automotive technological advances – innovations we take for granted were once massive selling points. We see 40hp and 60hp machines that hold five people in comfort being sold in 1907, the Klaxon horn of 1910 being “audible to another driver a quarter to half a mile ahead” and the advent of Duco paints by Dupont in the mid-1920s, making a wide choice of colours another heavily advertised option.

Fast-forward to the 1980s and the ads offer such mod cons as digitally tuned radios, electric seats, windows and sunroofs, disc brakes and independent suspension.

Today, the push to get consumers into green cars has created an industry for the promotion of eco-friendly vehicles, but this is not new – in 1917, the Milburn Light Electric was advertised with pretty, cartoonish art and promises of “unusually long mileage

per charge”. At the time, the Milburn could travel for 80km per charge and, by 1918, this was up to 160km. This would be ample for today’s city commuter, although the top speed was only 30kph.

A lack of political correctness is nothing new in the world of car advertisements, especially with the portrayal of the sexes. From 1900 onwards, the main role of women in car advertisements was decorative. Edwardian ladies were usually illustrated as passengers, such as a 1907 line drawing for Oldsmobile, or, less commonly, as drivers, such as the winsome woman in a 1909 ad for the Pierce Arrow Runabout. Elegant flappers were frequently drawn emerging from cars in the 1920s and, by midcentury, endlessly smiling women, in the role of pretty consort, dutiful wife or mother of perfect children, were commonplace.

Some of the slogans spoke volumes about the attitude towards women, with words that seem to come straight from the mouth of Don Draper, the debonair, womanising ad executive on television’s *Mad Men*.

In 1957, a poster offered “congratulations to the man who drives the ex-

clusive Imperial” while the Plymouth “married... his love of sports cars and her love of beauty and comfort.” The 1959 Dodge had the tagline “The Swing-Out Seat that says... ‘Please Come In’” with a slightly disturbing drawing of a grey-haired gent offering a ride to a young, pink-clad blonde.

“Powerful enough to be a male, elegant enough to be a female” was the 1963 attempt to sell the Buick Riviera.

By 1964, the only thing that could come between a Corvair owner and his car, at least in the heads of the marketing gurus, was his wife, complete with an ad featuring a man sitting at a bus stop while his frivolous better half was in the Corvair laden with prettily coloured shopping.

The growing women’s movement played a scant role in car advertisements in the 1970s. There was an attempt by Honda to dispel the myth that women only drive automatic transmissions, with a 1975 Honda Civic advertisement that stood out among ads that still represented women as ornaments rather than active automobile users. In 1974, there was an astonishing collaboration between Subaru and Playboy with

the slogan “Playboy thinks a lot of its Bunny of the Year. That’s why they gave her a Subaru.”

The nameless, African-American gold swimsuit-clad Playboy Bunny is one of only a tiny handful of non-white faces in the book. The few include an African-American man posing alongside a 1974 Chevrolet Monte Carlo, another hanging out on the basketball court in office attire in a 1986 Mercury Cougar ad and basketball star Wilt Chamberlain in an admittedly rather clever 1966 Volkswagen Beetle ad.

Right through to 1999, ethnic diversity is not a major factor in car advertisements. But as the book draws to a close, the advertisements become more about flashy locations and oily-smooth photography than people.

The glimpses into the past contain plenty of messages that would be howled down in a barrage of politically correct criticism today. PETA would have a field day with a 1965 Pontiac GTO ad featuring an open-mouthed tiger skin rug across the bonnet with the tagline “There’s a live one under the hood”. One of the selling points for the 1977 Honda Civic 1200 is a rear-seat ashtray.

Meanwhile, anyone who decries the common sight on UAE roads of unrestrained children in cars will look askance on the 1960 ad for the International Travelall. It is a nine-seater to be sure, but the image of the child standing in the middle row is certainly alarming.

Amid the clichés and images that change little between decades, Volkswagen stands out as being innovative before its time. From the chirpy “Turns on a dime... Parks on a dime... runs on pennies” VW truck poster from 1958 to the minimalist but effective Beetle ads of the 1960s and 1970s that play up the car’s small size and eye-catching shape and the individuality of its drivers, these are the advertisements that have truly stood the test of time, even if the cleverness was lost on Don Draper in one *Mad Men* episode.

No matter its recent troubles, the car industry will be around for a long, long time, in some form or another. And we can be assured that, as long as it is, car advertisements will continue to be a part of driving culture.

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Classic Cars: 100 Years of Automotive Ads
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