CAR COMMERCIALS: REALITY VS. IMAGE

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[Assignment: Write an essay about some aspect of contemporary life in which it is appropriate to sort things into categories in order to develop your thesis.]

(1) While planning the advertising campaign for the 1980 model year, the truck division of Ford Motor Company discovered an opportunity to pitch the advantages of the new "twin I-beam" suspension on national television. Ford devised a commercial that would not only demonstrate the suspension's road handling ability, but would also highlight the raw hill climbing power of a Ford truck. For this demonstration, Ford's ad agency conceived the "cinder block mountain." In the final take, the Ford F-150 clambered up the cinder blocks with ease. After the novelty of a pickup climbing a heap of cinder blocks wore off, the advertising agency filmed a more ambitious shot. They placed a Chevy half-ton pickup inside the payload bay of the hill climbing Ford. In 1984, the advertisers took a step further, placing a GMC full size in the cargo hold of the Chevy riding piggyback on the Ford. In 1986, Ford answered a challenge from Dodge. Yet another prime-time spot showcased the "cinder block mountain." This time, a souped-up Ford piggybacked Chevy and GMC half-tons while towing a full-size Dodge pickup. Ford's competitors could only watch as the Ford truck achieved feat after feat. In 1988, however, Chevy retaliated. In a spot featuring the new full size Chevrolet pickup, the Chevy truck proceeded to tow away the hill the Ford was climbing. Will 1990 bring even more aggressive truck stunts?

(2) Ford's prime-time television offensive continued because the ads surpassed the original goal of selling to truck buyers who absolutely needed the truck's suspension or the truck's power. The mountain climbing Ford catered to a desire common to most vehicle buyers: the desire for power. The adventures of one Ford truck suggested that all Ford trucks were powerful. The ads' further success was derived from a side effect created by the original power appeal. When the Ford truck commercials progressed to carrying competitor's trucks, the GMC and Chevy truck owners took notice. They didn't want to have the truck with inferior power. The performance of the base model Ford seemed to imply that all GMC, Dodge, and Chevy truck models had less power than their Ford counterparts. Consequently, the target audience expanded to include GMC and Chevrolet owners who were considering trading up in their own brand instead of switching to Ford.

(3) The Ford truck commercials were using the first of what could be described as the "seven p" appeals to the vehicle buyer's psyche. Power, performance, prestige, patriotism, price, protection, and pitchmen are all elements automotive advertisers employ to maximize the impact of a car or truck commercial on prime time
television. Automotive advertisers center their commercials on one of the "p" appeals and one segment of the vehicle market. Despite the one particular appeal, the target audience of an automotive commercial often extends beyond the boundaries suggested by the style of the commercial. This side effect is welcomed by ad agencies and manufacturers alike. Only large audiences can justify paying steep prime time advertising rates. As a result, the "seven p's" have created a dual role for the prime time automotive commercial: sell the car or truck to the target market, and strengthen the image of the manufacturer among the entire vehicle buying public.

(4) The second "p," performance, was the appeal of choice for Toyota when it produced a segment touting the 1989 Camry. The promotion depicted four older women poised to rocket their 1989 Camry onto a California freeway. Margaret, the driver, tried to explain how she feared freeway driving until she bought her Camry with the new 24 valve V-6 engine. The backseat passengers urged "Punch it, Margaret! Yeah, punch it!" as Margaret effortlessly glided the Camry into the center lane. Toyota's spot was cited as one of a group of pioneering commercials with senior citizens as the stars. The target audience here may have been older people who desired a well engineered, reasonably priced touring car. However, Toyota's stress on performance also caters to the large number of car buying women who desire the extra acceleration needed to pass semi-trucks. Although young women may not want anything to do with the "golden girls" of the Toyota ad, the spot draws on the female desire to avoid male scorn for driving at geriatric speed. The advertisement implies to male and female car buyers alike that today's Toyotas are not the underpowered tin cans that they were a decade ago.

(5) The third "p" factor, prestige, was the theme of a 1984 Lincoln spot. Most Lincolns are bought by upper income people, so Lincoln's choice of a country club setting for the ad was appropriate. In the take, a stately gentleman and his spectacularly dressed wife prompt the parking lot attendant to retrieve a Cadillac. Another attendant is asked to retrieve an owner's Buick. A third wealthy couple beckons a third attendant to retrieve their Oldsmobile. The three full-size cars arrive at the entrance simultaneously. The black cars all look alike, and soon the patrons are castigating the attendants for giving them the wrong cars. The club members start asking each other: "What are you doing with my car?" A Lincoln owner, however, experiences no mix-ups when obtaining his car. His Lincoln Continental is of a distinct color and body style.

(6) Lincoln timed the commercial perfectly, releasing the spot shortly after the introduction of a series of look-alike full-size cars from General Motors. The advertisement not only improved the prestige of the
Lincoln Continental, but of the entire Lincoln lineup. The advertisement aimed to create the impression that Lincolns were distinct because they were designed to be Lincolns and bear no name other than Lincoln. By buying a Lincoln, the ad implied, the buyer would not get his car lost among General Motors' cookie cutter models. In this advertisement, the Lincoln Continental had greater prestige than the Cadillac DeVille, Buick Electra, and Oldsmobile 98. The indirect benefit of prestige suggested in this commercial would extend to the Lincoln Mark and Lincoln Town Car, which would also be perceived as superior to their GM counterparts.

(7) One of television's all time classic jingles was the product of Chevrolet's decision to capitalize on the fourth "p" appeal: patriotism. "Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet" was dubbed onto every Chevrolet promotional spot. Chevrolet's theme was perfect for the time: Our American cars fit your American values. The theme was intended to reaffirm that Chevrolet was better tuned to the car buying public than Volkswagen or the Japanese automakers. The slogan was most appropriate for Chevrolet's intermediate and full size models. At a time of inexpensive gasoline, Chevrolet's enormous Impalas, Caprices, and Chevelles suited middle-class American values better than the underpowered import econoboxes. Ultimately the campaign was best heeded in Chevrolet's traditional Midwest power base. As a result, baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet became synonymous with mid-size cars and middle America.

(8) Advertisements stressing the fifth "p," price, have historically been the domain of the low priced imports. The traditional target audience was the penny-pinching young couple, student, or businessman. New competition from the United States and Japan, however, has prompted one European luxury car maker to extend the price appeal to more expensive cars. Saab once had a lock on the market for small and sporty luxury cars, but in 1989 the Japanese Acura, Infiniti, and Lexus cars are poised to gnaw at Saab's heels. Saab's response--market the lowest price Saab at a price of its competitors, but advertise that because the car is a Saab, it is better engineered and better built. A commercial asks: "Why do you spend $20,000 for a car that they say looks like a Saab? Why do you spend $20,000 for a car that drives like a Saab, has the resale value of a Saab and is priced like a Saab?" The target audience is the upper income car buyer who can afford only the lowest cost Saab. The ad is intended to lure people to buy the "poor man's Saab" in hopes of developing customer loyalty and raising customers for the more expensive Saab. This spot might suggest that Saab is "downwardly mobile," but by claiming that comparatively priced competitors have inferior performance, Saab maintains the integrity of its lineup. The commercial is an affirmation to rich and "poor" Saab owners alike that Saab engineering carries "the most bang
for the buck."

(9) The sixth "p," protection, is the newest member of the "p" appeal club. Safety often proves to be an inert sales tactic, and until recently its appeal to advertisers has been limited. According to a former Ford executive named Lee Iacocca, Ford flopped on a 1956 safety campaign. To the young, safety devices such as seat belts or 85 mile per hour speedometers appear as threats to their driving pleasure. Recent debacles like the Ford Pinto, the GM X-cars, and the Suzuki Samurai, however, have spurred a new promotional emphasis on safety. One recent prime time installment features a crane placing a freight truck on the roof of a Volvo sedan. The Volvo's body didn't buckle a millimeter. The Volvo shown was an average Volvo that would appeal to families who wanted a car that was durable over the miles and durable in a crash. Because the entire Volvo lineup shared the boxy style of the test car, Volvo implied that all of its cars were rugged. People who were more interested in the turbo models or the luxurious 760 series could be assured that their choice of Volvo was also safe.

(10) Chrysler advertising agency Kenyon and Eckhardt needed to find a way to show that Chrysler was again a solid corporation. No tool could work better than the seventh "p": the pitchman. In the fall of 1982, Chairman Lee Iacocca beamed: "You can go with Chrysler, or you can go with someone else, and take your chances." Although Iacocca touted Chrysler's new New Yorker and LeBaron convertible, the target audience of this famous pitchman's spiel was anyone who had ever thought about buying a Chrysler car. Iacocca's position as president of Chrysler and his reputation of being a turnaround artist bolstered the public's confidence in the firm. After good times came to Chrysler, Iacocca remained in the commercials. The advertisements may have been aimed strictly at minivan buyers, but Iacocca's appearance told all car buyers that Detroit's miracle man was still at work. Chrysler's pitchman transcends models and divisions. Lee Iacocca sells every Chrysler Corporation product in every appearance.

(11) Each time an automotive spot airs on television, corporate image is promoted as much as the sales quota. The "seven p's" are the chief selling tools, but the appeals have been extended to encompass campaigns for entire fleets of cars. Like the "baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet" of a decade ago, "The Heartbeat of America" adds a patriotic message to every Chevrolet advertised. Hyundai has added more expensive cars to its lineup, but it still offers "cars that make sense." Pontiac injects thrills into even the lamest Pontiacs with the durable credo "We build excitement." No other corporate chief is known better for selling his product than Lee Iacocca.
Prime time car commercials are using particular "p" appeals to sell a car to particular slices of American demography. The most recent models of car commercials, with their stress placed on corporate image, have created the perception that all cars of a given brand satisfy a single "p" appeal. Car identities are blurred with the manufacturer's and advertiser's missions. The exotic $50,000 Chevrolet Corvette ZR-1 scarcely fits the description "The Heartbeat of America." The Nissan 300 ZX, car of choice of Paul Newman and other racers, seems built for the stock car circuit rather than "Built for the human race." These supercars are known as the pinnacles of design, engineering, and craftsmanship of their respective manufacturers. The commitment to excellence manifested in these cars and other sophisticated models is rarely emphasized in prime time commercials. Quality and design are not two of the "p" appeals. Consequently, automotive manufacturers are promoting their image through advertising rather than through technological achievement.