

Volkswagen erneut mit Absatzrückgang in USA - Phaeton und Touareg schwach

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Es scheint, als ob VW langsam was für den Amerika-Absatz tun will. Hier ist ein interessanter Artikel aus dem Wall Street Journal:

VW's American Road Trip

As Its Sales Continue to Drag, German Automaker Assigns A Team to Study U.S. Drivers

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Malibu, Calif. -- FOR YEARS, Volker Jagodzinski, brought up in the no-nonsense cockpits of German cars, couldn't understand why Americans treat their automobiles like rolling extensions of their living rooms.

Then the Volkswagen AG engineer spent 3 1/2 grueling hours on a Greyhound bus from Seattle to Portland, Ore., and saw the vast distances Americans journey in their cars -- and why so few resort to trains or buses.

"If you lose your car here, you're done," Mr. Jagodzinski says. "I was surprised by the amount of time people spent in their cars."

His road trip was a part of a Volkswagen project dubbed "Moonraker," a year-and-a-half-long effort to gain a deeper understanding of American culture in hopes of making cars more appealing to U.S. consumers.

The project shows how far car makers are willing to go these days to get inside the heads of their customers. Auto manufacturers have long used focus groups to get feedback on models in development, but many go well beyond that. Ford Motor

Co. now creates an imaginary persona for the target customer of new models -- inventing, for example, an Asian-American teacher in her early 30s named Jenny for its just-launched Fusion. DaimlerChrysler AG's Chrysler Group even creates rooms to reflect the personalities of these imaginary customers.

Volkswagen's Moonraker is part of an effort to turn around the fortunes of the company's U.S. operation, where it has lost more than \$1 billion in each of the past two years as a result of declining sales, unfavorable exchange rates and quality problems. It hasn't helped that for years engineers in VW's headquarters in Wolfsburg, Germany, paid little attention to feedback from U.S. customers asking for roomier, more functional vehicles such as minivans and sport-utility vehicles.

The first results of the effort will be on display this week at the Los Angeles auto show, where VW will unveil a fun, high-tech, three-wheel concept vehicle geared toward the Southern California market, described as a combination of its sporty GTI and a motorcycle.

Although the company has its American headquarters in Auburn Hills, Mich., and a design center in Simi Valley, Calif. (which helped develop the auto show car), the U.S. never had a strong voice in Wolfsburg.

"We needed a totally different approach," says Stefan Liske, VW's director of product strategy and creator of Moonraker. "We asked ourselves, 'Do we really know everything about this market?' "

In December 2004, VW put together the Moonraker team of 19 European and four U.S. engineering, marketing, design and sales staffers. Two months later, the team members came to the U.S. to live and work until June 2006. In their first 24 days in the country, the team traveled to 24 states, visiting the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn., the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland and the World of Coca-Cola museum in Atlanta. In Dallas, the members went to a rodeo and a drag race. In Daytona Beach, Fla., they found out what spring break means for American high-school and college students. They also tried out every form of transportation, including taking subway rides, driving rental cars and taking red-eye flights. They had to drive a different vehicle every week.

The Moonraker staffers say they've learned a lot about American car buyers, like why storage space is so important to them and why they can never have enough speakers in a vehicle. While Germans prize a car's driving capability and frown on eating while driving, the Moonraker team found Americans think of their cars like a second home or office.

"In Germany, it's all about driving, but here, it's about everything but driving," says VW designer Reto Brun. "People here want to use their time in other ways, like talk on their cellphone."

When not on the road, the group of three women and 20 men work together in a 12,000 square-foot secluded home in Malibu, which was chosen because it's a trendsetting area. Half of the team also live at the Malibu home, which is covered with posters and charts that feature data about Volkswagen and its competitors. Some of the posters show pictures of consumers Volkswagen has interviewed through ride-alongs and other programs.

For a day, Mr. Jagodzinski shadowed a single mother, traveling with her to drop her children off at school and pick up dry cleaning. On one of these trips he realized American moms could really use a place to store a tissue box and space to put down burgers from the drive-through.

"I began thinking about what specific features her car needed," he says. "It was about living the customer's life and putting ourselves in their place."

One big revelation from Nascar: tailgating. When Jens Berger, a fan of the more-staid Formula One races, walked into a parking lot at the Atlanta Motor Speedway, he was surprised to see many of the fans there listening to the competition on the radio instead of watching the race. And he didn't understand why they had set up a makeshift campground there. The Germans in the group never knew Americans use their cars as portable buffets tables and partymobiles, a discovery that could factor into future vehicles, such as a minivan.

One exhausting exercise was dubbed the "Walk of Pain" -- a three-day walk from Long Beach to Hollywood to observe parking lots and street parking, a requirement for each Moonraker team member. Mr. Berger said it helped him realize that in the U.S. market there is a need for a wide variety of vehicles: from small cars to pickups to convertibles. "You could clearly see the different requirements for mobility," he said.

Although Volkswagen has been receptive to Moonraker's suggestions, the team still finds it hard at times to get its message across to Germany. For example, it's been difficult to convey the importance of cupholders because it sounds trivial to headquarters staff. Sensitizing colleagues in Wolfsburg to American needs is why the team has been making two to three short movies a month that include interviews with consumers and clips of the Moonraker team at various events.

It seems to be working. By the time Moonraker wraps up this summer, VW hopes the project will have provided the basis for as many as three more vehicles within the next decade and helped expand the company's range of products. VW will also have to consider how to keep the insight coming, perhaps, continuing to send people to the U.S. for a similar, scaled-back program.

Volkswagen thinks Moonraker is successful enough that it is expanding the idea to other markets. The car maker started a similar cultural immersion project in China dubbed "Swan Lake" and another as-yet-named team will begin in India in January.