

## Trying to Connect in a Crowd

Stuart Elliott



In a TV ad, a Subaru Forester owner says goodbye to his old one at a yard where Subarus are parked for the last time.

LOVE is all you need, Subaru declares in a push for its 2009 models — along with all-wheel drive, a safety pedal system, low-emission engines and an environmentally correct plant.

The first work for Subaru of America from its new creative agency for the general market, Carmichael Lynch, is to be shown to dealers on Thursday at a meeting in Salt Lake City. The campaign tries to add emotional reasons for buying a Subaru to the rational approach the brand has taken for many years, most recently in ads from a previous agency, DDB Worldwide.

The theme created by DDB, "It's what makes a Subaru a Subaru" remains in the new ads. In front of those words is a new one, "Love."

Research shows that owners are ardent about their Foresters, Impreza WRXs, Outbacks, Tribecas and other Subarus. Subaru owners keep their vehicles longer than the average car owner, and talk about them approvingly to people they know.

But because Subaru has found it difficult to get attention in a crowded automotive market, the number of Subarus sold each year in the United States — 187,203 last year, versus 200,703 in 2006 — pales in comparison with bigger, more advertised brands like Honda, Nissan or Toyota.

A single Honda model, the CR-V, outsold all the Subarus in 2007 by selling 219,160 units.

Enter Carmichael Lynch, part of the Interpublic Group of Companies, which was unexpectedly hired last October to replace DDB, an Omnicom Group agency.

•

Tim Mahoney, the new chief marketing officer at Subaru of America, had worked with Carmichael Lynch when he led marketing for Porsche Cars North America. After Porsche left Carmichael Lynch for Cramer-Krasselt, Mr. Mahoney saw his chance and told DDB to, um, hit the road.

It is an increasingly common tale on Madison Avenue: live by the new C.M.O., die by the new C.M.O.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Mahoney said that he and Carmichael Lynch "had a great, great partnership" when he was at Porsche. "I'm glad we're able to continue to work together."

One aspect of the agency that appealed to Mr. Mahoney, he said, was its desire to find an "overarching idea" about Subaru "that's a brand truth, that connects an Outback owner in Philadelphia with a WRX owner in California."

Data gathered by Carmichael Lynch determined that most automakers, including Subaru, "were trying to out-argue each other based on rational reasons: features, benefits, the deal," he added.

"If we're going to connect with customers, it will have to be at a more emotional level," Mr. Mahoney said. "Certainly, rational reasons are important, but it has to be more of a blend to get people to put us on the list."

That tack makes sense to a consultant who specializes in brand and customer loyalty.

"For years, if you needed to go up a hill covered with snow, the only one you'd think about was Subaru," said Robert K. Passikoff, president at Brand Keys in New York. "And that was very successful."

"But that kind of single-value ownership is not that leverageable anymore," he added. "Now it's 'tell me something else.' "

In research conducted by Brand Keys, Mr. Passikoff said, Subaru scores well on qualities like durability, fuel efficiency, styling, safety and being environmentally responsible. (The last point was influenced by a popular commercial from DDB that plays up the ecological credentials of the Subaru assembly plant in Lafayette, Ind.)

Even so, Subaru ranks sixth out of 16 auto names in a Brand Keys survey, Mr. Passikoff said, trailing, in order, Toyota, BMW and Mercedes (in a tie), Honda and Nissan.

The Subaru campaign, with an estimated budget of \$200 million, includes commercials as well as print and digital ads. Like virtually all automakers, Subaru is increasing its spending online significantly. In the last year, that budget has just about doubled, said Kevin Mayer, director for marketing communications at Subaru of America in Cherry Hill, N.J., a division of Fuji Heavy Industries.

Love for Subarus is expressed in various warm and fuzzy ways in the initial batch of TV spots. In one, a man describes how he and his brothers drive in an Outback each Dec. 31 to the easternmost point in the United States so they can be the first ones to welcome the new year.

In a second commercial, the owner of a new Forester bids farewell to his old one at the automotive equivalent of the elephant graveyard: a salvage yard where Subarus are parked for the last time.

Other spots tell stories with similar emotional lifts. One takes an upbeat, "pay it forward" theme by showing an owner of an Impreza feeding a parking meter for the absent owner of a snazzier Impreza WRX STI. In another spot with a kind of Hallmark glow, a busy owner of a Tribeca takes a break to bond with his young son.

"We spent a lot of time speaking with owners," said John Colasanti, chief executive at Carmichael Lynch in Minneapolis, "who said they see their car as an enabler, an accomplice, on their journey of life, and the more experiences, you have the deeper the relationship you have with the vehicle."

A perception fought for years by Subaru agencies and marketing chiefs is that the brand is more appropriate for offbeat, even fringe types of car owners than mainstream drivers.

"These people are proud they're not like everyone else," Mr. Colasanti acknowledged, "and we're not going to be the car everyone has."

At the same time, Mr. Mahoney said, "it's not about Subaru stereotypes" but rather "about a relationship to our car, to our brand, that appeals to our owners and has the ability to appeal to a few more."

- 

In addition to creating the ads for the general market, Carmichael Lynch also became the media planning and buying agency for Subaru, assuming those duties from an Omnicom media agency, Prometheus.

Carmichael Lynch is working with other agencies on the Subaru roster that include R/GA, also owned by Interpublic, for the digital ads; AdAsia, for campaigns aimed at Asian-Americans; and Moon City Productions, for ads aimed at gay men and lesbians.

**Disponível em: <<http://www.nytimes.com>>. Acesso em 24/4/2008.**

A utilização deste artigo é exclusivo para fins educacionais