

Saab needs to go outside the car-box-branding



Stefan Engeseth

Time is running out and Saab is not selling enough cars. The 9-3 model needs to be a success and General Motors is running out of patience, writes the Swedish author of 'Detective Marketing', Stefan Engeseth. "The brand is too weak to extract premium margins. Saab remains a potent national symbol for Swedes," the Financial Times says. Common sense and "out of the box" thinking can drive Saab to sell more cars.

Many critics say that Saab needs to redesign the car model to be more different. Yes, that's true but more interesting; can branding knowledge be a part of product development? Why are brands interesting and products often boring? GM wants fast results, but redesigning takes time and is expensive. So let us look at ways for Saab to break the declining trend and sell more cars.

Use the values in the Swedish nation brand: Sweden needs Saab as a potent symbol and without the original brands, Sweden would more or less be a blond brand marketed by Hollywood.

The concept of nations as brands has long been accepted. Saab is using values (ie, safety, environment, quality, etc) from the nation brand. How can Sweden as a brand and Saab work together? For instance, all Saab owners worldwide should visit Sweden on the same day as a PR marketing campaign. Wherever a Saab owner is in the world, he or she should have a connection to Sweden. Why not offer a promotional trip to Sweden for the first 50,000 new car buyers? Also offer a special trip to 20,000 recent buyers of the latest Saab model. Develop the PR and branding for the car by collaborating with famous Saab owners. For instance, Bjorn Borg could drive a Saab across Europe back home to Sweden. You can work globally with this Saab tour by using the local sales and marketing forces. What an adventure you could create for local Saab owners from UK, Spain, USA, etc -- who can drive their Saab to Sweden? How wild will the local press drive the Saab brand? Maybe some newspaper headlines will be "The Vikings are going back to Sweden, and their leader is Saab this time". Get the salespeople to listen to the consumer buzz on the street level and incorporate it with the marketing.

If Tiger Woods is driving and playing golf on the way to Sweden, then support the golf target group with the same model in PR and marketing. To support the tour, there should be a campaign site, www.saabadventure.com, on the internet where all the drivers can build a community. Every car should have a sticker with a unique number from 1-70,000. When people spot any of these cars on the street, they can go to the website and read about different family adventures, see photos, read their diary or send them questions about their car (this would make it easy for the press to follow the tour). Consumers can compete to win a brand new Saab by booking a free test drive on the internet.

If there is an average of three people in every of the 70,000 cars, the tour totals 210,000 Saab fans. If they use special printed postcards and community emails to send their stories from the trip to 20 friends, it will be about 4,200,000 people that will read and spread the word about the Saab story (why not send 10% of these to the CEOs of GM). Every week there is a top 10 story list on the site for reporters and fans to read and spread. To support the storytelling from the contenders, they should produce specially made car accessories.

Swedish tourism would be delighted with 210,000 people visiting and spending money in the country. Moreover, there could be millions of future tourists inspired by the publicity of the tour. How strong will this consumption of Sweden make the Saab brand? The brand values hidden behind the scene, usually not visible for consumers, need to be made visible. When you give a car a deeper identity and history, its buyers are less likely to change brand. And, isn't it true that most brands today within the car industry are considered "global brands", with no deeper identity?

In addition to profit on the sales of cars connected to the tour, Saab will have a lot of opportunities to gain extra income and additional values. For example, the tour could be partly financed by partners with matching brands, interested in the publicity and context of the adventure.

Here are some questions to develop the adventure tour:

How can they not only finance the adventure, but also make a profit? How can every sale of a trip to Sweden also communicate an offer from Saab? What other opportunities do you see on this tour?

This is only one example of how a company could recreate an identity lost in globalisation by using their roots. Selling 200,000 cars is now a problem outside the car-box.

The Swedish management consultant and speaker Stefan Engeseth's book 'Detective Marketing' has been translated and adapted for the English-language market. In its original version, the book was hailed by marketing professionals and the general public as a landmark work in using creativity in the world of business. Named the "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" of the business world by his colleagues, Engeseth has been lauded for his simple yet challenging concepts.

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