THE POETRY OF DETROIT AUTO

Danny Heitman has a quirkily fascinating op-ed up in the New York Times on the attempt in the mid to late 50s by Ford Motor Company to enlist a poet laureate to help sell its products:

> The question is brought to mind by the story of Marianne Moore, the famous American writer, who served for a brief season as the Ford Motor Company's unofficial poet laureate.
> …
> A Ford executive wrote that the company was launching "a rather important new series of cars," but his team was stumped to think of a name for the latest product line. Could Moore, an icon of American letters, help them out?
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> Moore embraced the assignment with relish, not surprising for a poet who enjoyed — and whose writing was frequently inspired by — popular culture, whether it be baseball, boxing or bric-a-brac. The correspondence became a cultural fixture of its own after it was published in The New Yorker two years later.
> …
> These days, poetry and commerce are rarely on such good speaking terms. Poetry doesn't sell well, and poets almost never attain the celebrity that touched Moore, Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg half a century ago. If some Detroit executive got the bright idea to consult a poet for marketing advice today, one rather doubts he'd know whom to call.
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> It's nice to think that the two groups — poets and carmakers — might find new relevance through collaboration, but history is not encouraging.

I share Heitman’s conclusion that such a collaboration is probably not in the offing in today’s society and marketplace. I think, however, Detroit is going to rebound with a different kind of poetry.

Poetry in motion.

If Detroit is to rebound, it will not be from fancy words or catchy phrases to hawk their products; it will be from engineering excellence, desirable design and competitive, if not superlative, production values. They are much further along this path than many people give them credit for being though.

The Ford Fusion and Fusion Hybrid, Ford Focus, Ford Escape and Escape Hybrid, and the new Ford Taurus are all absolutely killer vehicles, both on their own and compared with foreign competitors. These cars are all world class in their segments. Add them to the always top of the segment Ford Truck line, especially the F-150, and you have a company that is here to stay and ready to take on all comers.

Financially, Ford had the jump on the old GM; Ford leveraged themselves and had the cash on hand to ride out the US financial implosion without the bailouts that both GM and Chrysler took to survive. But the lead in products and product development is nowhere near so pronounced, and arguably non-existent. In fact, there is a good argument that the "New GM" is every bit as poised to lead and prosper as Ford as the New GM has been shed (whether you agree with it having been done, it is a fact now) of its major burdens and streamlined in product lines, vehicles and manufacturing capacity.

The New GM sports such products as the Chevrolet Malibu, Chevrolet Camaro, Chevrolet Traverse, GMC Acadia, Cadillac CTS, Cadillac SRX, Buick Enclave and new Buick LaCrosse (Dan Neil says it blows away the Lexus ES350). And of course, the Chevy Volt and Cruze will be arriving in 2010 as well and and both promise to be game changers of the highest order. Throw in the Chevy/GMC truck line and the niche segment Chevy Corvette and you really have a company with cutting edge, world class in segment, vehicles. Like Ford, the New GM is poised for success.

I would argue that not only is Detroit, or at least the Big Two, ready and able to compete with the foreigh competition, but that head to head within segments, they may have more interesting products that are every bit the technological and reliability matches. I think one other point needs to be made for all the naysayers: Every one of the vehicles I just mentioned, which will serve as the renaissance of Detroit Auto if there is to be one (and I think there will) was either in production, or well in the pipeline before the big crash. The Big Two were already changing in a very positive way for the new century when the bottom fell out; in fact, that is one of the biggest reasons they were so exposed when it did. Either way, however, they have the products, both now and in the immediate pipeline, to compete heads up with foreign competition.

If they make their products the poetry, Detroit will recover, live long and prosper. If they don’t, they won’t. It is really that simple.