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State Fair car show uses 'product specialists' as a vehicle for sales

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Standing on a stage at the State Fair of Texas, microphone in hand, Julie Tyler extols the virtues of Toyota's 2010 Prius hybrid: completely redesigned, astoundingly fuel efficient and Earth-friendly.



DAVID WOO/DMN

Margery Krevsky (left), president of Productions Plus, came up with the idea of using product specialists like Julie Tyler (background), who have been trained to discuss the vehicles they tout with auto show visitors.

The L.A. model could easily handle a body-tight gown and speak only scripted lines. But that isn't what Toyota wants.

Dressed in khaki capris, athletic shoes and Toyota polo shirt, Tyler is cast and costumed down to her cropped hair and once-over-lightly makeup for a sweet, approachable Katie Couric look. And she's free to speak her mind.

That's because she has a trained one.

"We learn all the material, and then it's up to us to put together the presentation," says Tyler, once she's off the stage and back working the sales floor.

Call it auto show improv.

When a fairgoer asks how many tickets it would take to buy a Prius, Tyler does the 50-cent-a-coupon math in her head and responds: 44,000 for a base model (\$22,000), more like 64,000 (\$32,000) for a fully loaded one.

You can thank, or blame, Margery Krevsky for transforming turntable Barbies at auto shows into walking, talking marketing mavens – and dudes – who also happen to be quite attractive.

When a young, good-looking gal or guy offers to answer your questions at the Toyota, Nissan, Scion or Lexus sections at the fair, that person isn't a sales temp hired locally but a "product specialist" working for Krevsky's suburban Detroit talent agency, Productions Plus Inc.

Krevsky came up with the idea while attending a Detroit auto show in 1981. A model she often hired for her fashion show business was acting as a goddesslike hood ornament for a Cadillac. Krevsky was interested in buying one, but the model couldn't talk about the car until she went on break.

What a waste of talent, Krevsky thought.

It took two years to convince the first auto company, Pontiac, to give it a go. Since then, her agency has provided talent to nearly every car company in the world.

She's even written a pictorial history of this evolution called *Sirens of Chrome: The Enduring Allure of Auto Show Models*.

One of my favorite visions in the book is of a sequined mermaid serving as a human hood ornament for a 1964 Plymouth Barracuda.

Krevsky's current clients, in addition to those at the fair, include Infiniti, Mitsubishi, Porsche, Honda and Acura.

Her agency finds and hires the talent, mostly actors and models. But the carmakers approve or disapprove of her discoveries through auditions. Many work with the same automakers and often the same type of vehicle season after season.

Travel, training and wardrobe are paid for by the automakers.

Newbies make \$250 a day. Senior talent can make up to \$1,000 a day. Most earn \$300 to \$500 for six to eight hours of kibitzing with consumers.

For example, Krevsky has assembled a team of 70 to work the nation for Toyota, with 28 at the State Fair – including four from the Dallas area.

One is Brandie Riggs, formerly a mutual funds trader at Bank of America here. She now does print modeling and travels the auto show circuit with Productions Plus and Toyota.

Another Dallasite, Kyle Turman, schedules his sonogram job at Medical City Dallas Hospital around his auto show gigs.

He particularly likes playing "Stump the Auto Dude."

"Last year, this guy asked if the roof rack on our Land Cruiser would support an elk, and I said, 'It depends on how big the elk is,' " Turman says with a laugh. "But I also said, 'If you think you can get it up there, go for it.' "

Product specialists also have to know about the competition's lineup because those cars may be parked just feet away and consumers love to comparison-shop.

"We always teach that you never say anything bad about a competitor," says Krevsky, sitting outside the Centennial Building. "But you give enough information so that people can make a decision."

All of her fair clients go for comfy costuming. At other shows in convention halls, the gals typically wear 3-inch heels on carpet-over-concrete floors. Being able to look chic while perched on stilettos for six to eight hours is an agency hiring requirement.

Talk about hazardous duty.

"In the past, Lexus has done designer outfits like Gucci," says Krevsky. "And that has to have a really perfect shoe with it. It can't be a Naturalizer comfort shoe."

The State Fair comes early in the auto show season, which runs from early fall to late spring. Krevsky hopes it's the beginning of better times.

As you might imagine, the 2009 season was ghastly.

A number of auto companies, including several of her mainstay clients, cut back drastically last season.

"But this year, companies seem to understand the importance of the auto show," says Krevsky, whose agency will bring in about \$15 million from automotive clients this year.

"We're coming back to our roots where the car is the star, not all the fancy exhibits with the techno-whatever," she says. "Consumers want to ask tough, tough questions. And they should. Answering those tough questions is what my product specialists do, and do well."

Joe Gallant, manager of shows and exhibits for Nissan and Infiniti, agrees.

With her help, Nissan, a client of Productions Plus for more than 20 years, is rolling out its new national auto show concept, which abandons high heels and business attire and goes for an Apple store feel and look.

"You go there for the experience. That's what we're doing. This is a game-changer for us," Gallant says from his office in Nashville, Tenn. "Working with Margery, our goal was for our people to be accessible, friendly, outgoing and approachable. We've achieved that."