

The Detroit News

Thursday, January 15, 2009

Laura Berman: Commentary

Car models switch to gear-heads

"We wore cocktail dresses and pointed. The male models were the ones who were allowed to talk."

In Boca Raton, where former Detroit model agency executive Phyllis Popa has lived for 12 years, this year's auto show conjures memories dating to 1955, when Popa was a glamorous young model and Detroit's "mad men" era of muscular cars, padded bras and padded expense accounts was in full swing.

Then things changed, at the speed of a melting iceberg. Or did it? And when did the auto show models add speaking -- and even product knowledge tests -- to their long-standing repertoire of glammed-up pouting and pointing?

Margery Krevsky, the president of talent agency Productions Plus, has penned an illustrated history of the Detroit auto show, "Sirens of Chrome." In interviews the last few weeks, she's suggested she was the force who changed models from pointers to "product information specialists."

For example, she told NPR that models would say, "Oh, I'm not allowed to talk about the car, but I do know about it' ... And so I presented to several automotive manufacturers an idea of product specialist -- highly trained men and women and people of diversity who could talk about cars and become real gear-heads."

A changing landscape

Krevsky is respected as a businesswoman and force in the Detroit modeling world. But her account of her central role strikes many models and journalists of that era as overblown. But if it wasn't Krevsky, exactly, then who?

As it happens, at least a couple of the key players in the transformation of dumbed-down sexpot models to informed, smartly dressed ones aren't the expected suspects.

From Boca, Popa recalls a Ford executive, Clint Mahlke, seizing a '70s moment and insisting that her models dress in white lab coats -- projecting an image of technical efficiency, not glamour, that resonated for years to come.

And Harriet Fuller, who was Krevsky's business partner at Productions Plus for 20 years, remembers that whatever she and Krevsky wanted, the Big 3 weren't ready for change.

Some dealers and executives wouldn't let go of the "Playboy type outfits," says Fuller. Men loved them, even if their wives didn't.

Toyota steps up

It was Toyota that changed the game for real, in the early 1990s. "They wanted something very different: college educated, lovely ladies, real people who could talk about the cars," she recalls.

Krevsky readily agrees that transformation "was in the air" for years.

By the time a Toyota executive asked Fuller for college-educated, attractive women presenters, the sexy-but-mute model concept was as stale as the 700-year-old Twinkie in "Wall-E."

It was a man -- of the Japanese auto executive variety -- who forcefully changed the mix.