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Author-talent agent recounts evolution of auto show spokeswomen

BY PATRICIA MONTEMURRI FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Margery Krevsky is impeccably dressed and coiffed, confident and calm, gracious and knowledgeable -- much like the pageant queen-pretty women her agency trains to talk to auto fans about hybrid fuel technology and innovative idling mechanisms.

Krevsky, owner and CEO of Productions Plus talent agency in Bingham Farms, manages auto show talent. She's been doing that for nearly 30 years, and she is credited with transforming the auto show models

you'll see at the upcoming North American International Auto Show into product specialists.

"I'd like to think I helped the auto show culture evolve out of T&A to a place of professional respect," Krevsky writes in her recent, "Sirens of Chrome: The Enduring Allure of Auto Show Models" (Momentum, \$24.95).

Krevsky's book chronicles the evolution of the auto show model -- and the auto shows that have adored them.



Margery Krevsky at the book signing.



Melissa Tien of Clawson wears a Pontiac dress from the 1990s at Margery Krevsky's book signing for "Sirens of Chrome" at the Detroit Public Library last month. A show of photos from the book runs through April 30 at the Detroit Public Library Skillman Branch, 121 Gratiot.

Today's model blends beauty with gearhead knowledge and showmanship. Things have come a long way from the days of the book's cover girl, in a sequined gown with mermaid tail, perched atop a Plymouth Barracuda at the 1963 Detroit Auto Show.

"The cars are on the floor," says Krevsky. "But they can't talk. It's the product specialists who make the cars the stars."

"The auto show's models, who function as product specialists and narrators, are essential," says Barron Meade, president of Meade Lexus dealerships in Southfield and Utica.

"If you had cars there with nobody, it wouldn't be an auto show," says Meade.

The autos' human accessories can add to the vehicle's appeal, and what they say about them can make them accessible and attainable, or add to their aura.

Krevsky moved to Detroit from New York City in the mid-1970s to work for J.L. Hudson. She was manager of Hudson's fashion bureau, and produced hundreds of fashion shows and events every year. Each of the Hudson's stores would have 5 to 10 shows a year, from informal modeling events to haute couture productions.

In 1981, she went into business with Harriet Fuller, a model who worked for her. Their first goal was to create fashion shows, but soon they were bidding for auto show business.

"I knew I liked the design and color of cars, but not so much what was under the hood," says Krevsky, who lives in Bloomfield Hills with her husband, Seymour. But once here, she says, "you become part of the car city."

In the mid-'80s, when Krevsky urged her staffers to use their brains as well as their beauty to tout vehicle attributes, car execs took notice.

"That was a revolutionary idea," Krevsky says. "It really made sense to talk torque, horsepower, V-6 engine and V-8 engine ... to compare the BMW to the Mercedes."

Productions Plus now represents Toyota, Lexus, Scion, Nissan, Infiniti, Honda, Acura, Mitsubishi, Porsche and the Chevrolet Racing Team. The agency employs about 250 to 300 specialists, three-quarters of them female. The other big local agency for auto show talent is Gail & Rice of Southfield.

The auto show models who work for Krevsky undergo weeks of training, both at Productions Plus and with manufacturers.

Krevsky says she showcases women who are "pretty, charming and attractive, but they need to know cars."

The auto show circuit can take narrators and product specialists to any of 73 shows around the country, from the big city shows in Chicago, L.A. and Miami, to smaller gigs

in Peoria, Ill., and Greensboro, N.C.

Or even the Texas State Fair. That's where 31-year-old Rebekah Decker has touted Nissan cars for eight years. The glamour stays in the closet there, and the usual eye-catching auto show garb is replaced with a very casual outfit -- khaki pants, tennis shoes and a Nissan shirt.

Decker is a beauty pageant veteran -- she was Miss Michigan USA 2002 -- who started working auto shows during college at Michigan State. It's how Decker, of Grand Rapids, earns a living now -- traveling to 10 to 15 auto shows a year.

What she didn't know about cars she quickly learned.

"I feel like I can walk into any dealership and I know more than anybody," Decker says. "And I can talk cars with my dad."

Auto models can work for years, moving from display talent to behind-the-scenes managers.

"There are lots of things to do, besides stand on the auto show floor," says Krevsky. There are positions managing talent, display and wardrobe logistics, for example, she says.

Hedy Popson, who started as an auto show product specialist when she was a theater major at Michigan State University, worked the auto show floor for 15 years and now heads the Productions Plus Los Angeles office, scouting for talent.

Krevsky has employees who've worked for the same brand for nearly 20 years on the floor.

And the pay is good. Auto show talent can earn from \$200 to \$500 a day, and work as many as 80 to 90 days during the auto show season, which runs from September to May.

This year, even with the historic slump in auto sales and the travails of Detroit auto companies, Krevsky says people will still expect a show when the big auto expo hits Cobo Center later this month.

"I think people like glamour. I don't think people want to come in and see a boring show," says Krevsky. "There's an emphasis on driving people into showrooms, but part of that will be the show."

At each auto show, Krevsky does her part. She works the show's information booth in 3-inch heels (at least for one whole day).

"So I know how it feels for 8 hours a day," says Krevsky. And if one of her employees says, " 'My feet hurt,' I can say, 'I understand your pain.' "

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