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SOUTHFIELD – Cars aren't the only things required to stage an auto show. No show, in fact, would be complete without the "talent" that staffs the displays and show off the vehicles to the public.

"We don't even use the term models anymore. That term hasn't been used in years," said Tim Rice, co-owner of Southfield-based Gail & Rice, which has provided the talent for auto show displays for much of its 78-year history.



Gail & Rice's training program, for example, includes everything from online instruction, to tips on handling patrons who might be upset or angry, to driving vehicles that might be in displays to learn more about their characteristics.

"There is a lot of training," he said.

The product specialists, who are available on the show floor, review automotive-related Web sites to develop their knowledge of Chrysler products and competitors, read reviews and research automotive technology and technologies specific to the products they will be representing, Rice said.

The talent also has to project the image sought by the specific manufacturers.

"You have to fit the demographics and you have to have an aptitude for learning," Rice said. "Products specialists are one and one with the customers. You have to come off with high degree knowledge."

Age also comes into consideration.

"We use people from early 20s into their 50s," he said. "It all depends on what carmakers want. We really work close with brand teams to give them the image that they want for a particular vehicle."

An understanding of what the carmaker wants is critical, said Rice, whose firm has worked with automakers such as Chrysler over the years.

“Having provided these services to Chrysler in the past, we have a good familiarity with Chrysler’s expectations at auto shows,” Rice said.

“This understanding coupled with our years of experience in auto show marketing and product branding will enable us to develop a highly educated staff of product specialists able to consistently deliver Chrysler’s exciting message to its audience,” he said.

Rice said preparations for the auto show season actually begin in the spring with a look at colors and wardrobes that will fit the image the manufacturers wants.

In addition, the agency also will help design the training program.

Training even continues during the shows themselves, with product specialists and narrators using offstage time to walk the show floor and review competitive products to be able to better answer questions about their specific brands.

Margery Krevsky, founder and president of Productions Plus of Bingham Farms, which also provides talent used by manufacturers to promote their products at auto shows, highlighted the evolution of the auto show model in her book, “Sirens of Chrome.”

Up until the 1980s, automakers used fashion models to help show their cars but the models weren’t supposed to talk. Instead, they were literally little more than living hood ornaments, according to Krevsky.

However, many of the women were quite knowledgeable about cars and Krevsky founded her talent agency — now one of the largest in Midwest — on the idea that the automakers ought to consider expanding the role of the talent and offer them a speaking part.

Productions Plus now has offices in Chicago and Los Angeles and recently acquired “The Talent Shop” as it continues to expand.