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NEWS: Sirens Of Chrome

New book explores the changing role of women auto show models.

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In Greek mythology, sirens were seductive creatures, winged women with angelic faces and irresistible songs. Author and talent agency owner Margery Krevsky of Bloomfield Hills believes their modern-day counterparts (minus the wings, of course) can be found strutting their stuff on auto show floors. According to Krevsky, today's auto show models, or product information specialists as they're called, possess the same alluring qualities as the mythical creatures of Greek legend.

"They seek not to dash ships upon rocks but to entice the purchase of land-worthy ships to sail upon the highways and byways of America," she writes in her book, *Sirens of Chrome: The Enduring Allure of Auto Show Models*.

Krevsky should know.

She has spent the last 28 years helping select and train auto show talent through her Bingham Farms-based company, Productions Plus. She's also credited with reinventing the role of the models, insisting they evolve from sex kittens and beauty queens into trained, knowledgeable spokespeople for Ford, Chrysler, General Motors, Lexus or whichever car company they represent.

"The cars cannot talk, no matter how fabulous they look or how wonderful things are under the hood," Krevsky says. "It's the product specialists who are left to speak for them."

As we usher in 2009, auto show models may have a greater sense of purpose than ever before. Detroit's Big Three automakers are hurting. Slumping sales, layoffs and even talk of bankruptcy have dominated the headlines; a \$17.4 billion emergency rescue package from the Bush administration is expected to help General Motors and Chrysler get through the first part of the year. Despite the difficult times, a fresh crop of models will take their places at Detroit's North American International Auto Show Jan. 17-25 at Cobo Center and do their best to put a positive spin on these trying times.

"It is frightening," Krevsky admits. "But it's not the first time our automakers have faced hard times and it won't be the last."

A Radical Idea

Krevsky joined the automotive world in 1981 (two years after the government guaranteed loans to Chrysler, staving off impending bankruptcy). She and model Harriet Fuller of Bloomfield Hills co-founded Productions Plus with the goal of supplying auto show talent. But, Krevsky had a radical idea: take the



focus off the models' curves and emphasize another attribute - their brains. She entered the field with a fresh perspective as a Jewish wife and mother, a former Glamour magazine editor and fashion merchandiser for Hudson's, with degrees in elementary education and business. At first, she says her idea was met with resistance.

"I even had executives from the motor companies say, 'No, we really like things the way they are,'" she recalls.

Still, Krevsky forged ahead.



She explains her motivation in the introduction to her book. "I came into the business hoping to take models out of cleavage-revealing tops, short shorts and sequined ball gowns," she writes. "After all, Snow White and Barbie weren't the role models of an increasingly potent corps of women buyers - who now influence 80 percent of all vehicle purchases."

What was once considered radical is the norm today. Each auto company holds its own intensive product specialist training program lasting a week to three days. Models get a basic overview of the industry, learning about specific products, the culture and brand of vehicle they represent, and how it stacks up against the competition. They also take part in a hands-on "ride and drive" day so they know what the car feels like and how it handles.

Krevsky remains president and CEO of Productions Plus, which has grown into one of the leading suppliers of auto show talent with offices in Detroit, Chicago and Los Angeles.

"I'd like to think I helped the auto show culture evolve out of T&A to a place of professional respect," she says.



Changing Times

Over the last century, the auto industry has undergone many dramatic changes. Krevsky's book takes readers back through time with dozens of rare photographs and automotive ads from 1900-2007. Many of the images are from the National Automotive History Collection (NAHC) at the Detroit Public Library; others are from private collections and corporate files. Some have never been displayed before.

"They were really fun to find and go through," Krevsky says. "I could have done 10 books because there were just a plethora of photos."

On one page, suffragist Alice Snitzer Burke is seen changing the tire on a 1916 Saxon; on another, a dancer is perched like a hood ornament atop a 1927 Packard; 40 years later, three models in colorful mod dresses are pictured standing with a 1967 Camaro; a 2005 photo shows a golden concept car from a Czech automaker outshined by two scantily clad models in hot pants. The book is also filled with behind-the-scenes stories. Some are humorous; others, like the story that goes with a black and white photo of model Nell Theobald, are shocking and tragic. Theobald is seen posing with a lion at a BMW press conference during the 1966 New York auto show.

"Seconds after this publicity photo was taken with television cameras rolling, 225-pound Ludwig the Lion sunk his jaws into her thigh and held tight until his handlers could pry her loose," reads the accompanying passage. "Doctors were able to save Theobald's leg, but post-traumatic stress interrupted her career ... Sadly, she later took her own life."

Another passage focuses on the auto show from the models perspective.

In 1946, during the Golden Jubilee of the Automobile, six blocks of Woodward Avenue were painted gold for a parade featuring models dressed as goddesses and floats featuring cars reminiscent of Roman chariots.

This fashionable model for the

1989 Pontiac Grand Prix sees all kinds of people in the auto show audience all day long, including mothers who use the car's back seat to change diapers.

Gold medal Olympic skater Sonja Henie added glamour to this 1936 Cord, with its retractable headlights and imposing grill.

Taylor Jackson of Birmingham, Shari Barnett of Bloomfield Township and Stephanie Wohlgamuth of West Bloomfield

"You see every type of person imaginable. You watch mothers take their babies into the back seat of an open vehicle to change diapers ... Some people act rude to try and get you to yell at them. You get marriage proposals all the time."

In conjunction with the book's release, the Detroit Public Library Friends Foundation and the Friends of the NAHC launched an free exhibition. Dozens of photographs and memorabilia of auto show models are on display through April 30 at the library's Skillman Branch on Gratiot in Detroit.

"It's fantastic," she said. "There are old audio and video clips of Dinah Shore singing 'See the USA in your Chevrolet.' Some of the vintage advertising is just remarkable."

Krevsky also recently learned Sirens of Chrome made the 2009 Michigan Notable Books list. She'll be honored along with other authors during a special ceremony at the governor's mansion in April. But first, there's this year's Detroit auto show to attend to. Over the next few weeks, Krevsky will be on the auto show floor among the anticipated crowd of more than 700,000 people. But things will be different. Many companies are scaling back due to the economy: Nissan, Infiniti, Mitsubishi, Rolls-Royce, Ferrari, Suzuki, Land Rover and Porsche will not have exhibits.

Through it all, Krevsky remains optimistic.

"The Mustang is very important, so is the Corvette - classic basics that are true," she says. "Detroit is an automotive town. These are very bright people running these companies. Have they made mistakes? Yes. But there isn't a company that hasn't. I think we'll see things turn around."

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