

The hummer campaign: an overview

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OVERVIEW When General Motors Corporation (GM) acquired the commercial marketing rights to the Hummer truck, the civilian version of the U. S. Army's Humvee, it faced the challenge of promoting a vehicle that was never intended to be sold in high numbers. Part of the solution was to design smaller, less-expensive versions, the H2 and H3, but much of the success would have to depend on the marketing. Rather than turning to a roster of ad agencies it usually worked with, GM hired a young Boston creative boutique, Modernista! , in 2000. The initial goal of the \$35 million campaign, begun in August 2001, was to establish Hummer as a luxury brand.

Thus, images of mud-splattered Hummers that played up the vehicle's off-road capabilities were scrapped in favor of shots that made it seem jewel-like. Once the brand was repositioned, the marketers' goal was to pitch the lower-priced H2 and H3 to a wider market, hopefully to more women. Factors such as rising gas prices and the perception that the Hummer was oversized for most consumers proved to be major hurdles for the marketers. However, by the end of 2003 the campaign had succeeded in redefining the Hummer brand, and with the introduction of the H3 in 2005, the marketers took on a new challenge: selling the Hummer to a mass market.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT The Humvee was designed for the U. S. Army in 1979 by AM General Corp. , based in South Bend, Indiana. The 3. 5-ton vehicle became a star of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, spurring consumer demand for a civilian version, which was introduced in 1992 as the Hummer. It catered to an exclusive market, as demonstrated by the fact that Arnold Schwarzenegger was one of the first buyers. The vehicle never received

much advertising support; AM General spent less than \$1 million on marketing the Hummer in 1999, when it sold about 700 of the trucks.

Nevertheless, AM General did enough business to attract the attention of General Motors, and in the end bought the Hummer brand in late 1999. GM signed a seven-year contract with AM General to produce the next generation, GM-designed version, the Hummer H2 sport-utility vehicle (SUV). The agency Modernista! was hired to promote the brand. Prior marketing efforts had played up the military connection and the Hummer's off-road capabilities, billing the vehicle as "the world's most serious 4x4."

Modernista! won the account because it was the only agency that attempted to fashion a wider appeal by going beyond the tough-guy, army-truck image.

The principals involved in the campaign did not lack experience in selling cars. Modernista!'s cofounder, Lance Jensen, had worked with Hummer's advertising director, Liz Vanzura, when she was at Volkswagen of America and he was with the Boston-based ad agency Arnold Communications. Both played key roles in developing Volkswagen's award-winning "Drivers Wanted" campaign. Vanzura commented that, while the Volkswagen ads were aimed at "cool, young people," her new mission was to sell Hummers to "cool, rich people." TARGET MARKET Even before hiring Modernista! , GM had done a great deal of market research.

According to Ted Evanoff, writing for the Indianapolis Star, "In 1999 researchers stumbled across the notion that an unlikely cross-section of America—surgeons, dot-com millionaires, rock stars, high school students, corporate execs—prized their individuality. And they regarded the rugged

Hummer as a symbol of individuality, especially compared with the typical sport-utility common in suburbia. ” Modernista! was given 2, 200 pages of market data to distill into an advertising message. The agency was also handed a brand that skewed very much toward males, averaging 50 years in age and with an annual household income of more than \$200, 000.

The target buyer for the less-expensive H2, while still male, was 42 years old on average and had a household income above \$125, 000. Vanzura told Chris Reidy of the Boston Globe that the coveted audience included “ rugged individualists, adventurous entrepreneurs, and adrenaline junkies. ” In other interviews she described the target market as “ successful achievers” and “ style leaders. ” She also told Evanoff that Hummer had to vie with other purchases the well-to-do might consider, such as yachts or vacation houses, stating, “ We’re really not competing in an automotive category. ’

COMPETITION The yacht, vacation house, and other status symbols notwithstanding, Hummer competed in the luxury-SUV category against other SUVs, including the Lincoln Navigator, Land Rover’s Range Rover, and the Lexus LX 470. But Hummer’s chief opponent was DaimlerChrysler’s Jeep Wrangler. Boasting similar military roots but extending back to World War II, Jeep had defined the SUV category and at its height in 1993 controlled nearly 30 percent of the traditional SUV market.

Over the following several years, however, the brand failed had to introduce new models, and its lessexpensive ones faced increasingly stiff competition, resulting in a severe erosion of sales. As long as Hummer was not a direct competitor, DaimlerChrysler took little notice of it, but as soon as GM

acquired the right to mass-market the Hummer, DaimlerChrysler recognized the threat at the high end of the SUV category and became determined to hold on to Jeep's reputation as the premier heavy-duty, off-road brand. The two vehicles had slightly different target markets, however.

Jeep appealed to consumers who loved the outdoors and might attend one of the dozens of Jeep Jamboree off-road events held throughout the year.

Typical Hummer customers, on the other hand, wanted the off-road capabilities the vehicle had to offer but were more interested in the image it created. They were as likely to drive their Hummers to an upscale mall as up a mountain. **MARKETING STRATEGY** In preparation for marketing the lower-priced H2, Modernista! instituted a bridge campaign, paid for by AM General, to sell the H1 while repositioning the brand.

As Will Uronis, an associate creative director at Modernista! , explained to the Boston Herald 's Greg Gatlin, " Hollywood had defined what Hummers stood for—war, explosions and arrogance . . . We just took a look at another facet of the truck. " Jensen added, " We went out and talked to guys that drove them . . . they don't all hunt and kill things. " Nevertheless, Hollywood movies had done a good job of making consumers aware of the Hummer. Market research conducted in 1999 indicated that as many as one in five buyers of full-size SUVs considered purchasing the Hummer.

The bridge campaign was intended to play to the " rugged individualists" who, research revealed, were attracted to the Hummer and to set the stage for the launch of the H2 by creating an emotional attachment to the brand that transcended the hard-edged image fostered by Hollywood. According to

Evanoff, writing in the Indianapolis Star, the promotion of the H1 was intended to create a “ halo” over the brand, providing “ the foundation for a brand image that will carry the smaller H2. ” The first national ads for the GM-owned Hummer began appearing on August 13, 2001.

It was an all-print campaign that featured photographs of the vehicle in lush locales in Chile. Not only did the pictures suggest where the H1, with its off-road prowess, could take the viewer, but they also made the big truck look small. It was the first time Hummer was not portrayed covered in mud or linked to the military. Reinforcing the visual message of the ad was the text, which included the headline “ How did my soul get way out here? ” and the concluding text “ Sometimes you find yourself in the middle of nowhere.

And sometimes in the middle of nowhere you find yourself. The legendary H1. ” Hummer’s longtime tagline, “ World’s most serious 4x4,” was replaced by “ Like nothing else. ” The four ads ran through the rest of 2001, appearing in such publications as the Wall Street Journal, Barron’s, Esquire, Spin, Wired, and Red Herring. Hummer’s 50 dealers were also encouraged to use the ads created by Modernista! to bring continuity to the brand’s makeover, with some of their media costs being reimbursed by a cooperative advertising program.

The H2, based on GM’s Chevrolet Tahoe full-size SUV, was introduced in July 2002. A second model featuring a small pickup bed and a cargo door was supposed to be offered at the same time, but the launch was pushed back, partly because the vehicle needed more work but also as a way to extend the marketing buzz the brand was creating. The new H2, with a base price of

\$48, 000, was about half the price of the H1 and, despite being called the “baby Hummer,” essentially the same size.

But it featured a smaller, less noisy gas engine rather than a cumbersome diesel one, and it had comforts and customizable options the H1 lacked but that were expected in a luxury SUV. The introduction of the H2 was supported by another print campaign developed by Modernista! While the “Like nothing else” tagline of the previous ads was retained, the look of the new ads was markedly different, relying on dramatic close-ups set against bold, sky-blue backgrounds. Like the first ads, the new ones ran in a wide range of magazines, with the text tailored to the publication.

For example, in the Robb Report, which covered all things luxurious, the text read, “Excessive. In a Rome at the height of its power sort of way.” The Vanity Fair text read, “Threaten the men in your office in a whole new way,” part of an effort to increase the number of women buying the vehicles.

Another ad proclaimed, “Perfect for rugby moms.” About 10 percent of H1 owners were women, and one goal of the H2 campaign was to increase that number to 25 percent. Outdoor ads were also produced, running in 14 major markets, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit.

Print and outdoor ads were made available for the use of dealers. The first Hummer television ads aired in mid-August 2002. The initial three 30-second spots, intended to romanticize the truck, were shot in Iceland and in Vancouver, British Columbia, and featured both natural and urban locations. They showed friends in a Hummer speeding over the tundra of Iceland or a professional woman weaving through traffic in a city. Set to rockmusic, the

only words in the spots were text statements such as “ Maybe if you can, you will. ’ A second phase of the television campaign played on people’s perception of the Hummer as a gas-guzzling road hog. In one spot a young boy constructed a small wooden version of the Hummer to enter in a soapbox derby, while The Who’s “ Happy Jack” played in the background and the little girl next door looked on. At the start of the big race the other boys scoffed at little Jack and his less-than-streamlined racer, but he prevailed by abandoning the asphalt course, breaking the rules to go cross-country and win the race and the girl.

Through the humor of the spot Jack was portrayed not as a blatant cheater but as a heroic iconoclast, offering subliminal reassurance to potential Hummer customers who might feel guilty about buying a vehicle that got about 13 miles to a gallon of gas on the highway. A second Hummer spot, also displaying a tough side, hearkened back to the Asteroids video game of the 1980s, with a spaceship blasting boulders only to confront an indestructible Hummer, which chased the ship off the screen. OUTCOME GM and Modernista! succeeded in introducing Hummer to a wider market, but after a strong showing in 2003, sales began to tail off, partly because of high gas prices. To regain lost ground, in 2004 GM introduced the H2 SUT (sport-utility truck). This was followed by the unveiling in 2005 of the H3, a midsize Hummer priced from \$29, 500 to \$32, 000. Almost 17 inches shorter, 1, 700 pounds lighter, and more fuel-efficient at 20 miles per gallon, it was a vehicle GM hoped women and younger drivers would find more appealing. In pitching the vehicle to a mass market, Hummer and Modernista! faced a new task. Putting a positive spin on the challenge, Jensen told Jeremy W. Peters of

the New York Times, “ The brand has a lot of different personality levels . . . You can do the serious capability stuff, the real rough-and-tumble rock climbing stuff, the peaceful back-to-nature stuff. ” Industry analyst Mary Ann Keller disagreed, telling the New York Times that it was impossible to sell Hummer to the masses: “ How in the world can you possibly fathom that something that looks like a military vehicle is practical for the average driver? ”