



RACING

PASSIONATE OWNERS SHO HOW FORD CONNECTS WITH CUSTOMERS

By John M. Clor

We might be living in a so-called "social media" world, but as my compatriots at Ford Racing sure know, lasting friendships that are built in the automotive enthusiast community continue to depend on good, old-fashioned face-to-face relationships. That's been the case in the long, storied history of the Mustang, which has thrived through an amazingly enduring association between consumers and the brand's caretakers at Ford Division.

Sometimes Ford's special relationship with Mustang owners has come directly from the top, from company executives on down. In other years, those connections were communicated from the dealer level—with grassroots feedback heading up in the other direction. And over the rest of the 45 years of Mustang magic, an eclectic variety of Ford managers and chief engineers, of execs and designers, even racers and suppliers—all passionate and strong-willed—have helped power a bond between customer and car that is the envy of the industry.

I'm not talking about the all-too-typical imports and the oh-so-fickle American car buyer of the past decade. Clearly, there's not much passion at play in most of their purchase decisions these days—just look at some of the imported "best sellers!" No wonder buying and owning them is about as exciting and fulfilling as buying an appliance—because they're little more than appliances themselves! (You'll note there's not too many fan clubs around for your fridge!)

Oh, I've also heard the stuff about, "I bought that import because it has good resale value!" Now I don't know about you, but I say that if you're already thinking about the sale of your car the day you're buying it new, perhaps you're choosing the wrong car? I mean, how much can it mean to you if that's on your mind? And yes, I've also heard all the "quality" and "dependability" talk from import owners, but that's just what it becomes—much talk—when they won't accept the proof that American car quality and dependability is now as good as, or better than, the imports.

All of us felt our wallets get a lot lighter as our national focus turned to finding ways to stop America's dependence on foreign oil. But a far bigger drain on the very jobs that feed those wallets has resulted from

America's dependence on foreign cars. And stopping that is as simple as buying American products—the profits of which are kept in America to support American industry—and NOT sent overseas to support a foreign economy. It's all pretty simple, really.

That's why it's so frustrating for me to hear politician after politician say things like, "American carmakers need to learn how to make cars people want," or "American carmakers need to re-connect with the needs of their customers," or some other gibberish. Now I can't vouch for other American automakers, but I can tell you that Ford Motor Company could be considered the very definition of how an automaker best connects with its customers.

It might be unfair to keep talking about the Mustang when it comes to a passionate owner base, because indeed there is no other car with the kind of club following than Ford's iconic pony car. So let's talk about the full-size family sedan market where the Asian brands have stalked and finally surpassed the sales of once great-selling American nameplates like the Ford Taurus. Surely Ford can't boast of a strong, passionate connection there, right? ... Wrong!

Have you SEEN the new 2010 Taurus? It's downright striking, styled with a real purpose. Haven't you HEARD about the famed Ford Taurus SHO? It was the original sleeper sports sedan with a Super High Output V-6 engine, and it still is! Ford introduced an all-new 2010 Taurus SHO at this year's Chicago Auto Show, and guess who played a big role in the official media unveiling? You guessed it—a large contingent of passionate Taurus and SHO enthusiasts, representing at least FOUR major Taurus and SHO clubs! There are still thousands of enthusiasts actively involved in celebrating performance Ford sedans! I'm proud to say that Ford Racing's Ford Performance Group was able to leverage its club ties to help these enthusiasts get involved in the launch activities for the 2010 SHO—including participating in video interviews, bringing their classic SHOs to a special Dearborn media preview, attending the Chicago unveiling, and touring Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant, the birthplace of the new SHO. It proves our enthusiast outreach efforts provided a sustainable conduit between Ford Motor Company and a group of loyalists, not just for Mustang, but in support of product launch for a far different product!

You'll recall the Ford Performance Group

worked a similar interactive launch with selected members of the International Mustang Bullitt Owners Club (IMBOC) for the launch of the latest Bullitt Mustang and the www.FordPerformance.com web portal. The web initiative was intended to put a face and a place on Ford Motor Company's connection to enthusiast clubs and the performance aftermarket. The idea was to create a web site that helps facilitate a more interactive relationship between Ford and its past, present and future performance customers.

Does that mean you'll soon be seeing the National SHO Owners Club join the Ford Performance Group of enthusiast organizations on the web site (along with the MCA, IMBOC, the Mach 1 Registry, SVT Owners Association and the Motor City Marauders club? Well—yes!

"Adding the SHO club to our web site, and supporting our owners with our 800.FORD.788 Info Center and Tech Line is more good news for Ford performance enthusiasts," said Mickey Matus, Ford Performance Group Marketing Manager. "None of the other major automakers promote their enthusiast clubs like this, or give their performance customers a direct line to the factory. And thanks to our years of working with enthusiasts at the grassroots level, we're now able to offer clubs what their organizers had told us they wanted most: a way to promote their Ford performance passion, and the ability to gain a sustainable connection with the company."

Fact is, Ford is proving that it DOES make vehicles people want (other than only the Mustang) and that we DO connect with our customers in a meaningful way. It just goes to "SHO" you that our legion of enthusiasts are "Driving Ford Passion" in ways that no mere social media outlet can, and are the reason why Ford enjoys more vehicle clubs than any other brand on the planet. Hopefully, I'll be able to promote them all someday on www.FordPerformanceGroup.com.

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www.FordPerformance.com