

TOP 10 THINGS I LEARNED FROM ATTENDEES AT MUSTANG SHOWS

By John M. Clor

As part of Ford Racing's enthusiast outreach program, I not only get to connect with Ford loyalists 24-7 via www.FordPerformanceGroup.com week-in and week-out, but I also get the chance to meet face-to-face with many hundreds of Ford fans at car shows, club meetings, and banquets for the majority of weekends each year. Perhaps you've heard me speak about Ford performance at an event, or maybe we've even had the chance to chat at your local Mustang show while you picked up a free Ford Racing Performance Parts CD catalog at my pop-up tent.



While it's true I've been out there doing a lot of talking about the Ford brand, I wanted you to know that I've also been doing a lot of listening, too! In fact, getting your feedback on Ford vehicles, performance parts, and your entire ownership experience is a key function of our work with clubs, and drives our decisions on how we can best support the Ford enthusiast lifestyle.

As you might imagine, I've had countless personal conversations with a multitude of show attendees in every region of the country. They come from all walks of life—men, women, teens and children, young and old, from the rich to the unemployed. Indeed, I've met many fascinating and fun-loving Mustang people from nearly every state, and have lent an ear to their Ford stories—hearing about both their disappointments and their triumphs.

What I discovered is the old adage that, "... there's no such thing as a 'typical' Mustang owner" is absolutely true! But I also detected several fairly common threads that I'm quite comfortable to say most of us share—and I thought it'd be cool to list them here for you to see if you agree.

Let's call this, "Top 10 Things I Learned From Attendees At Mustang Shows." Here we go:

10. We all have a Mustang story: If there's one major validation that came from my time on the road, it's my long-standing contention that everyone has a Mustang story is an absolute truth! As a former full-time automotive journalist, I've long known that you and everyone you know has a Mustang story—and that doesn't mean you have to be among the millions of people who have actually owned one. Either you or someone in your family, or a friend, or even a friend of a friend, has driven, owned, raced, rode in, tinkered with, or had some sort of adventure or memorable occurrence in or around a Ford Mustang.

That's exactly why several years ago I had surfaced this concept to my Ford managers, and eventually you saw a "My Mustang Story" promotion and contest used as part of Ford's marketing efforts behind a new Mustang model-year launch. Most rewarding, however, was that a couple of other import manufacturers had later tried to use a similar idea to help promote their appliance-like vehicles (both polar opposites of what Mustang represents) via an "ask the person that drives one" kind of tag line. Seems everyone else wishes they had the kind of connection with owners that Mustang has enjoyed—but their vehicles simply can't push the same emotional buttons that Mustang has pushed for us!

9. We're not 'big' on Twitter: Yes, a lot of us MCA members fall into the baby-boomer-age category, but that doesn't mean we're not into adapting the latest technologies or getting involved in the current social media craze. Many of us have embraced social media as another way to connect with people—beyond just using the phone or sending an email. But there's a definite limit to that.

While we used to be laughed at by our kids because our cell phones seemed too big—you know, the kind that looked like Army walkie-talkies from the Korean War, or the ones you'd see on the old, "Saved By The Bell" TV sitcom—while the popular cell phones got ever-so smaller and more sophisticated. Yes, when texting became all the rage, some of us did wonder if it wasn't just easier to dial the number and talk, instead of spelling in out on a keypad. And we may have been slow to follow when the world moved to the BlackBerry (no, not the kind you put on your Cheerios), although so many folks will now say they don't know how they lived without their BlackBerry! Same goes for the shift to the iPhone and the use of all the different 'Apps' that the latest "smartphones" offer.

It seems that every generation has found a unique communication tool they can call their own. We had them back in the '60s and '70s, too! They were called CB radios. Just like today (LOL), we even used special codes (10-4!—what's your 20?) and our own lingo (there's a Smokey in the weeds!) as a shorthand to what we were saying. (OMG—the kids have nothing on us!)

Fact is, most boomers remain quite active and busy—whether still gainfully employed or retired—so we don't enjoy just killing time. Consequently, we lean toward things that offer

a time-saving function, rather than those that require ongoing monitoring. So while new smartphones may interest us, communicating via things like "Twitter" aren't high on our list. For us, we'd rather keep busy living our lives than spending time sending out the play-by-play of what we're doing at any particular moment.

8. We have—or would like to have—more than one Mustang:

Lots of us will talk about the Mustang we brought to the show—or the one we wanted to bring. But what was surprising was how many current owners had more than one Mustang! My wife, Jenny, had commented to me that she thought only I was crazy enough to own three Mustangs—and how surprised she was to hear so many people own multiple Mustangs. Not only do we have a car or two that we like to show, plus maybe a project car in the garage, some of us have a few or even several more as donor cars or "future projects."

It's amazing how we tend to want both a "driver" plus something to work on. And one phenomenon is certainly visible at every show: More and more owners of classic Mustangs are buying newer S-197-based Mustangs—the old one to show and the new one to drive and enjoy. When Jenny asked me why we need that many Mustangs in our lives, there was only one way I could explain it so that she'd instantly understand: "We'll," I replied, "it's kind of like shoes for you, honey!"

7. We liked Mercury, and aren't fans of alpha-numeric Lincoln names:

Perhaps some of the more surprising conversations I've had with Mustang fans involved the Mercury brand. Lots of us liked Mercury products (yes, the Cougar was tops among them)—and many expressed sadness at Ford's need to drop its mid-market brand. There were numerous families that had a Mercury or two sprinkled in with the Fords that filled their garages and driveways at one time or another. And most of those Mercury memories were good ones.

Oh sure, Lincolns were mentioned, too. And the product experience I heard about with Lincolns was just as positive. But what was surprising was how many people told me they weren't fond of the current alpha-numeric naming convention for the Lincoln lineup. "Is MKS the full-size sedan, and MKZ the mid-size?" Yes. "Is MKX the mid-size Crossover/SUV and the MKT the bigger one?" Yes. "Well, why don't they just use the names, like Continental, Zephyr, or Aviator?"

They seemed to understand my explanation that most other luxury brands, like BMW and Lexus, use alpha-numeric nomenclature for their vehicles. But one Town Car owner scolded me, saying, "Hogwash! They use that alphabet soup because they either had to sell across several European markets that spoke different languages, or simply because they had no brand-name heritage in the first place! Ford and Lincoln have great nameplates! And besides, we don't need to copy others or to follow what others do—we need to LEAD!"

... I told him I'd pass his feelings along.

6. 'Fish stories' and unfinished projects are common:

There's one thing I hear at every show, especially when stopping to admire someone's Mustang, and that's, "I also had a (fill in the blank) way back when, but I sold it because (fill in the blank)." Yes, just like in fishing, it seems every Mustang owner has a story about the "one that got away." We have to

realize that some of the rare, classic Mustangs are valuable because of the fact that we didn't hang on to every one that was built! Back then it was just a fun car—most of us had no idea that some of our daily driver Mustangs could become a future collectible!

Another thing owners will readily admit to is having an unfinished project car in storage someplace. Seems everybody was hanging on to an "oldie but a goodie" someplace in the hopes of someday restoring that old Mustang to shades of its former glory—or better. So many of us have Mustangs "in boxes" that I'm convinced that we're all really much better at taking things apart than we are at putting them together! My only advice here is: Hang onto the dream!

5. We're proud of Ford for avoiding government bailouts:

In these tough economic times, folks are always talking about the future of America and the auto industry—and something that I've heard over and over is how proud people are of Ford's turnaround. Most important to them was not taking a government bailout, and instead making the hard decisions to cut costs, pay off debts, and build better products to help right the business.

What's surprising here is that even non-Ford owners who were attending a Mustang show with their Ford friends have told me that they respect Ford for "pulling itself up by the bootstraps." Some have even said they'd consider buying a Ford the next time they're in the market for that reason alone. (That's great, but I have to admit to you here and now there's NOTHING anyone could ever do that would get me to consider buying a Camaro.)

4. We're 'social,' but prefer face time over Facebook:

These days—like it or not—social media has risen to the top of the pecking order of credible communications. Ford's own Jim Farley, our global sales and marketing chief, told reporters at the Chicago Auto Show recently that more trust is put in "word-of-mouth" than in media, so that's why Ford is actively engaged in social media sites like Facebook. Farley told them that people trust what the media has to say more than what Ford says, but also that people trust what their friends and neighbors say more than what is said in the media.



We've long known the power of grassroots marketing, but many of you have told me you would rather be talking face-to-face with Ford than on Facebook. Many show attendees had expressed appreciation that Ford sent me to a relatively small regional Mustang show to spend a day with real owners and customers. While many of us are on Facebook (I read that boomers represent the fastest-growing segment of new Facebook users), we still seem to prefer spending real "face time" with our Mustang friends. In fact, for a good number of us, the "social" aspect of the meetings, cruises and shows is the reason we joined our Mustang club in the first place!

I can tell you this, I do like seeing photos of the cars posted on my friends' Facebook pages—but I'd much rather see the cars in person—always! No matter how good your photos—there's nothing like seeing a car in person. And for me, that goes for people, too!

3. We're patriotic, and like 'American made': With the flood of import cars on America's roads and highways, you'd think that people have absolutely no interest in "buying American" anymore, or even care about the consequences of exporting our wealth overseas to foreign manufacturers. But Mustang people are quite interested in the debate, and have a deep appreciation for an iconic American car like Mustang, built by a great American company like Ford. In fact, owners seem to relish how much the Mustang just oozes American values—such as freedom, individuality, power and independence. They're quite proud of the Mustang's red, white, and blue heritage, and have no problem telling their friends and neighbors to buy American!

Another thing that struck me was that at some Mustang shows, after the opening announcements on the PA system and before the DJ would crank up the show music, the club would play our national anthem. Attendees and workers alike would stop in their tracks, remove their hats, and look to the flag in silence, or even sing along. Yup, Mustang people are as patriotic to the good ol' U.S. of A. as they are true-blue to the Ford Motor Company!

2. We collect Mustang stuff: In case you haven't noticed, there isn't a Mustang (or Ford) fan out there that doesn't have a deep-seated attraction to Mustang (or Ford) stuff. Not just cool collectibles like die-cast models and metal signs and the like—but all kinds of stuff, from hats to T-shirts, old parts to jewelry, lamps to clocks, you name it! If it's got a Mustang or Ford logo on it, or if has anything to do with a Mustang or Ford—then we like it and want to collect it!

That's why I like seeing vendors at car shows and love spending some time checking out all the old—and new—Mustang stuff for sale. Once you think you've seen it all you find something else, and your Mustang memorabilia collection can never be complete. For a total visual and mental overload, try walking the acres and acres of vendors in the swap meet area at the annual Ford Nationals in Carlisle, PA, on the first weekend in June. ... and bring lots of cash!

1. We love and drive Fords: And finally, the "Number One" truth that I witnessed by attending so many Mustang shows and talking to so many Mustang owners is that we love—and drive—Fords! I say this because it breaks a long-held and often-heard stereotype about MCA members, of "older folks

sitting in lawn chairs or polishing an old Mustang in a parking lot—who haven't bought a new Ford since."

I'm not going to say exactly who perpetuates such gibberish, but I can say that MCA members make up some of the biggest Ford vehicle families on the planet! It's common to hear that dad has a classic Mustang, drives a newer one but also plans to buy a 2012 with the new 5.0 liter; mom drives an Explorer; the daughter has an Escape; and the son has a Focus. And oh, in the garage is an F-150 that's used to tow the trailer for the old Mustang!

What I've heard and seen on my road trips only serves to verify what I've always known in my heart and mind as a Mustang enthusiast myself. And that's the fact that Mustang people and MCA members bleed Ford blue. We act as disciples for the Ford brand wherever we go. We are the kind of loyal owners that are the envy of every other auto manufacturer in the world!

To you all, thanks for helping to make the Mustang—and Ford—an American success story!



Editor's Note: Veteran automotive journalist John Clor has owned, raced, worked on, or written about Fords and Mustangs for nearly 30 years. After a 15-year career at The Detroit News, John shifted to automotive journalism with stints at AutoWeek and later Edmunds.com. He joined the Ford Special Vehicle Team in 1995 and spent the better part of the next decade working on SVT communications, PR, and Marketing. Today, he manages the www.FordPerformanceGroup.com enthusiast outreach program for Ford Racing, and is also a columnist for Mustang Trader magazine, editor of SVT Enthusiast magazine, and author of the hardcover history book, Mustang Dynasty. A member of several Ford-based car-clubs, John is the proud owner of three '70s-era Mustangs, including one that he calls "a long-term project."

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