

BMW NA 50th Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

Chapter 27: “The Hire: BMW’s Revolutionary Brand Campaign”

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It’s hard to imagine in today’s connected environment, but the internet wasn’t always the go-to medium when a carmaker wanted to reach a new audience. In the 20th century, ad campaigns premiered via the long-established

triumvirate of radio, print, and television, which had guaranteed audiences and familiar formats. As the 20th century gave way to the 21st, however, the new medium of the internet began to offer enticing possibilities...if marketers were daring enough to try it.

In Jim McDowell, BMW of North America had a Vice-President of Marketing and Product Strategy who was nothing if not daring. McDowell had followed a degree in behavioral psychology with a master’s in public policy at Harvard, then went to work conducting social science research for the RAND corporation. After a stint at Porsche Cars North America, he moved to Stuttgart to become director of marketing for Porsche AG, in both cases working with Minneapolis-based Fallon McElligot as Porsche’s advertising agency of record. In 1993, he was lured to BMW by Helmut Panke—first in Munich and then at BMW NA—and within two years he’d replaced BMW NA’s ineffective agency with Fallon.

At the time, BMW of North America was still climbing out of a slump that had seen sales fall by nearly half during a dreadful five years—from 96,759 cars in 1986 to just 53,343 in 1991. A performance-oriented product push from BMW NA President Vic Doolan and Product Planning Manager Rich Brekus was helped by Fallon’s effective advertising, and BMW NA sold 105,761 cars in 1996. In the year 2000, sales climbed to 189,423 cars.

BMW was on a roll, but its progress was threatened by a lack of new cars in 2001. “It was such an interesting time in our history, because there was no new product,” said Patrick McKenna, who’d joined BMW NA’s marketing team in 1997. “It was a lull, so we decided to do a brand campaign.”

BMW’s previous ads had always been well-polished, but they promoted individual products rather than the BMW brand as a whole.

“Because our marketing budgets were so small, all we did was launch cars,” McDowell said. “We never had money to run a brand campaign, and we weren’t very good at coming up with ideas for one. Finally, [Marketing Communications Manager] Baba Shetty drafted this document that basically said to Fallon, ‘We want to bring across the essence of the BMW brand, bring across the BMW chromosome.’ They came up with this idea that we could get a really good director to do a 15-minute film.”

BMW NA had already experienced great success with product placement in several James Bond films, starting with 1995’s *GoldenEye*. That film served as the public debut of the Z3 roadster, and it inspired Fallon to create Bond-themed ads for the car. It also expanded the notion of how a BMW could be used in film, which had previously been subject to strict rules from BMW’s legal department. “They became very cautious after the California lawsuit [regarding BMW’s claim of ‘friction-free motors’ in an ad by the Mullen agency], so they examined every storyboard and

proposed ad to ensure there was no speeding, reckless driving, or unsafe driving,” McDowell said. “Every driver had to be photographed with the shoulder harness engaged, even in a non-moving car. Film had to be made at an accurate speed, and all acceleration and braking claims had to be documented. They were stringent, because advertising was an implied promise to potential customers.”

Movies, on the other hand, carried no such promise. They were purely entertainment.

“We had learned from the James Bond films that we could break the rules about allowing the cars to be involved in collisions, driven off parking garages, etc., as long as everyone was safe,” McDowell said. “A lot of destruction was possible in film, which made it really exciting, and you could drive really fast. The lawyers approved the scripts, and there were discussions about anything reckless or unsafe. But the filmmakers were there to tell a story, and BMW couldn’t prevent that. They just wanted to ensure that the car was driven in heroic ways, not evil ways, to foil the bad guys and protect the innocent. The lawyers were still involved, but they measure the films against entertainment standards instead of advertising standards.”

Given that additional latitude, McDowell and his marketing team liked the idea of a 15-minute film, especially once Fallon suggested that the featured BMW be more than a mere prop or accessory. “When we were telling Fallon what we wanted, we told them it needed to be cinematic, it needed to be cool, and that we wanted people to be talking about it at work on a Monday morning,” said Patrick McKenna, who worked intensely with Fallon on the project. “They looked at *The French Connection*, *Le Mans*, *Ronin*, and said, ‘What if we could make the car the star?’ It started with that premise.”

The project would be audacious, not to mention expensive, but McDowell signed off on it immediately, McKenna said. “You could make a television

commercial for \$1 million, but viewers may or may not pay attention. Whereas we knew that if you came and watched a film we'd have your undivided attention for several minutes.”

It was doubtful that a short promotional film could get enough in-theater exposure to make it cost-effective, so BMW and Fallon decided to release its new campaign—which by then had evolved into not one but a series of short films, dubbed The Hire—on the internet. It was a



new, relatively untested medium, but BMW’s research had shown its customers to be early adopters of new technology. So was BMW NA, which had partnered with Apple Computer for the “BMW Cyber Drive” in 1997. By registering at bmwusa.com, participants could take a virtual test drive of a BMW in the Napa Valley wine country, for instance, or explore the other “cool sites and wonders of the world” over the 21-day promotion. “It almost ruined marriages and drove people to drink,” McDowell said. “Getting everything to work right was a problem.”

Four years later, the internet was far more capable, and so were the computers and connections people used to access it. YouTube hadn’t yet been created, so Fallon developed its own video player to deliver the

films. “That was well and good, except for the poor soul who had AOL, which took about five to eight hours overnight to download a five-minute film,” McDowell laughed. “But people tried it, and with every film there was more interest.”

Some of that interest was derived from the novelty of watching a film on one’s computer, but far more was generated by the top-flight directors recruited to the project by executive producer David Fincher. [Fincher had already directed *Seven*, *The Game*, and *Fight Club*, and he’d go on to make *Zodiac*, *The Social Network*, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, among other features.] “His motivation was to have a feature film in miniature,” McKenna said. “He was instrumental in getting A-list directors involved, including John Frankenheimer, who was 71 years old but had always wanted to work with David Fincher.”

Frankenheimer was legendary in the automotive enthusiast community for Grand Prix as well as the three films cited by Fallon in early discussions about the project. On April 26, 2001, the Frankenheimer-directed “Ambush” became the first of The Hire films available for streaming or download. Like the films that would follow, it starred Clive Owen as The Driver, an unnamed character hired to drive BMWs—in this case the E38 740i in its final year of production—through a variety of precarious situations that allowed for exciting action sequences.

“Ambush” was followed by “Chosen,” directed by Ang Lee fresh from his highly acclaimed work on *The Ice Storm* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Released on May 10, 2001, it highlighted the E39 540i.

Two weeks later, BMW Films released “The Follow,” directed by Wong Kar-Wai shortly after the release of *In The Mood for Love*. Unlike the first two films, which featured Owen with little-known actors, this one starred Mickey Rourke, Adriana Lima, and Forest Whitaker, as well as the E46 330Ci and the Z3. The film touched on domestic abuse, a serious subject normally avoided in automotive marketing campaigns.

The Hire was gaining new followers—and more kudos from critics of film and advertising—with each successive release, but neither BMW nor Fallon were prepared for what followed the release of “Star” in June 2001. Directed by Guy Ritchie, previously known for music videos as well as Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels, “Star” put Owen behind the wheel of an E39 M5 with pop star Madonna as his self-absorbed passenger. The film was hilarious, especially when Owen used the M5’s performance to give Madonna her comeuppance.

“With the Madonna film,” McDowell said, “all heck broke loose. All of a sudden, we were on every program that would interview people. We were in Time magazine. We were everywhere. People went back and started looking at the entire series, which in the meantime had become far more watchable. We had a plan for how we would add servers, but that plan was very inadequate given the level of demand, so we really had to scramble adding servers. But in the end, jillions more people saw this stuff than we ever dreamed.”

Advertisers have complicated metrics by which they measure success, but by all accounts The Hire had achieved its goal. “It was five times as effective in terms of cost per BMW minute than showing an ad during the Super Bowl,” McDowell said. “But the difference was that our cost per BMW minute was per screen, and the Super Bowl was per viewer. To the extent that multiple people watched The Hire on the same screen, that was even better. I’ll never forget: One day I walked into the Condé Nast building for a meeting, and there was absolutely no one on the floor. I turned the corner and found everyone in the lounge, watching The Hire.”

Following “Star,” The Hire concluded its first season with “Powder Keg,” a hard-hitting film about a war photographer played by Stellan Skarsgård, who’s driven away from a firefight in an X5 3.0i. “Powder Keg” was directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, then little known outside his native Mexico but already well regarded for Amores Perros.



The BMWs were certainly present in each film, but the directors didn't linger on the roundels, or luxuriate over the car's features. "Jim said it was like a great Western movie where BMW was

simply the horse," McKenna said. "It's a big part of the story, but not the entire story."

Even so, *The Hire* is credited for helping BMW NA's annual sales crest the 200,000 mark for the first time in 2001, with 213,127 cars sold—an increase of nine percent over the previous year's figure. After an additional three films from John Woo, Joe Carnahan, and Tony Scott were released in 2002, BMW's annual sales reached 232,032 cars.

"BMW Films was an excellent instrument," McDowell told *Bimmer* magazine in 2002. "The people who came to BMW Films were bright, curious people who were adept at using technology—exactly the demographic that buys our cars. At least 75 percent of the people who came to the site were prospects, and our goal was to plant the seed of future BMW ownership, to have people who saw the films dream of BMWs and maybe purchase one in five or six years. Having said that, we've been very pleasantly surprised by the number of viewers who have immediately purchased vehicles after seeing the films."

Commercially and creatively, *The Hire* was an unqualified success, seen by some 100 million viewers and enshrined in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was copied by other

automakers, including Nissan and Mercedes-Benz, but none of the imitators had the power of the original.

Within BMW NA's marketing department, The Hire proved a tough act to follow. "When we went back to conventional advertising, we were finding ourselves needing to push and push to try to get something that breaks through the clutter," McKenna said.

Even if that proved difficult, what BMW NA had achieved with The Hire was undeniable. "I think it gave us license to be more daring in all of the content that came later," McKenna said. "It opened some minds and raised the bar for what's possible."

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