

BMW NA 50th Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

Chapter 34: "Joy is BMW: BMW Brand Advertising Goes Global"

Written by: Jackie Jouret

How do you define the essence of BMW? Is it what the car is, or what the car makes you feel?

That question is at the heart of a controversy surrounding a 2010 BMW ad campaign that seemed to abandon BMW of North America's longstanding The Ultimate Driving Machine tagline for the more nebulous "Joy is BMW." The move outraged brand loyalists, not least because the campaign coincided with the introduction of cars like the 5 Series GT, aimed not at enthusiasts but at mainstream car buyers looking for a roomy interior rather than scintillating driving performance.

To brand loyalists, and to BMW of North America's marketing executives, The Ultimate Driving Machine was more than a mere ad slogan. Coined by Martin Puris in 1975, the phrase was at the heart of what they loved about the brand, a perfect expression of their emotions surrounding BMW.

By contrast, those in the marketing department at BMW AG in Munich preferred "Aus Freude am Fahren," the German tagline coined by the Gramm & Grey agency of Dusseldorf in 1965. In 1975, BMW dropped the "Aus," reducing the tagline to simply "Freude am Fahren." That translates most directly to "For the joy of driving," which became the British tagline "Sheer Driving Pleasure" and the French "Le plaisir de conduire."

BMW AG tolerated The Ultimate Driving Machine nonetheless, at least



while BMW of North America's sales were skyrocketing in the late 1970s and 1980s. By the end of that decade, however, BMW NA's sales began falling thanks to

Deutschmark-dollar currency fluctuations and a fresh challenge from Lexus. That put new pressure

on BMW NA to abandon The Ultimate Driving Machine tagline, as well as the Ammirati & Puris agency that created it.

"Munich felt we needed fresh thinking in terms of advertising, and there was even a request of me to drop The Ultimate Driving Machine," said Carl Flesher, then BMW NA's Marketing Director. "I refused. I fought for Ammirati & Puris, saying they are an excellent agency, they have a feel for the brand, and advertising is not going to turn this business around. It's got to be through product and pricing. They suggested we do the German thing, the Joy of Driving. I said, 'I'm sorry, but the Joy of Driving just doesn't land over here the way it does in Germany.' It really is a linguistic issue."

In 1992, Flesher was reassigned to BMW Manufacturing in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and BMW of North America put its advertising contracts up for review. Ammirati & Puris declined to participate, but the agency's short-lived successor retained The Ultimate Driving Machine tagline, as did the Fallon agency hired in 1995 by new VP of Marketing Jim McDowell. Working with McDowell's team, Fallon created innovative advertising that highlighted BMW's identity as The Ultimate Driving Machine, as well as the technical sophistication underlying that claim. The Fallon ads used new camera angles, putting

viewers in the driver's seat as a BMW was driven with gusto on a twisty road or dry lake bed.

Those performance-oriented ads had particular resonance in the US market, McDowell said. "The psychographic of the BMW customer is much different here than in Europe. We've always had a higher level of specification and standard equipment in the US. In Europe, they sell some low-powered BMWs that we would not think of as being the Ultimate Driving Machine."

In 2001, the conceptual divide between BMW NA's advertising and that of BMW worldwide was further highlighted by the Fallon-produced BMW Films, aka The Hire. The films were intensely focused on performance, and they drew massive attention and universal praise for their high quality and emotional impact. Although they were well received in Munich—Board Chairman Dr. Helmut Panke showed them to a massive audience of BMW employees at the Olympic Stadium—the films also prompted BMW AG to exercise greater influence on sales subsidiaries like BMW NA.

In 2005, McDowell swapped jobs with Jack Pitney, taking over as Head of MINI USA while Pitney became VP of Marketing. Pitney was inclined to collaborate more closely with Munich, and also to "humanize" BMW's image in the US.

"One criticism of BMW's advertising over the years was that the intense focus on the cars was too cold and clinical," said Patrick McKenna, then BMW NA's Department Head for Marketing Communications. "Even dealers would ask, 'Why don't we show people in our advertising?'"

In search of a new direction, Pitney put BMW NA's account up for review. Fallon declined to participate, and the creative account was awarded to Gurasich, Spence, Darilek & McClure of Austin, Texas, better known as GSD&M Idea City. The agency was known for the "Don't Mess With

Texas" anti-litter campaign, and for taking a humorous, offbeat approach to its subjects. Digital marketing would be handled by Kirschenbaum Bond Senecal + Partners of New York, and the two firms would work together to create a coordinated campaign across all media.

GSD&M's work for BMW kicked off with the "Company of Ideas" campaign that premiered on May 8, 2006. The print ads were almost entirely text-based, such as the one entitled "NO" that declared BMW's unwillingness to compromise while saying yes to the innovative ideas that make its cars Ultimate Driving Machines. For television, GSD&M used Zaha Hadid's dramatic architecture for BMW's Leipzig plant to highlight the firm's openness to creativity.

The ads were well received, not only in North America but in Munich, where Board Chairman Helmut Panke was especially enthusiastic about GSD&M's approach. "When I presented those ads to Panke, he slammed his fist on the table and said, "YES! You've managed to share our corporate strategy and make it understandable,'" McKenna said.

The ads resonated with the public, as well. BMW of North America's annual sales increased from 266,200 in 2005 to 274,432 in 2006, then to an even more impressive 293,794 units in 2007.

It wasn't to last. In early 2008, the market for mortgage-backed securities collapsed, followed by the stock market as a whole in September. BMW of North America's sales fell commensurately, to 249,113 cars in 2008 and to 195,502 cars a year later. In response, BMW AG made significant changes at the top of the NA org chart. After nine years as BMW NA CEO, Tom Purves was sent to Britain



JOY IS YOUTHFUL.

BMW of North America

to head up Rolls-Royce, while his fellow Scot Jim O'Donnell took over as CEO in Woodcliff Lake.

With that, the last bastion of BMW NA's resistance to "Freude am Fahren" was removed. "Purves always said that 'joy' was not the ideal translation for 'freude.' He was always pretty staunchly against using the word joy in communications," McKenna said.

O'Donnell had no such reservations. Moreover, he was on a mission to contain costs, as was BMW worldwide. Naturally, that would affect the marketing budget.

"When the E46 3 Series launched in 1998, there were 40 different ad campaigns around the world," McKenna said. "When the company examined that, they just saw so much inefficiency. By 2005, advertising was focused on three main campaigns around the world: Europe, Asia, and the Americas. After the financial crisis, there was an intense focus on having one campaign for the world: Joy. GSD&M was invited to pitch against every major global agency, and they won."

On May 14, 2009, GSD&M became BMW's agency of record worldwide. The first of the "Joy" ads began appearing in other markets in June 2009, but BMW NA waited to debut the Joy campaign until February 2010, airing the ads during the Vancouver Winter Olympics and in support of the advertising-themed television series *Mad Men*.

The ads showed BMW's cars cruising along sunny seaside streets or frolicking in the snow to an upbeat soundtrack, but the real focus was on those driving the cars, all of whom were smiling. "We realized a long time ago that what you make people feel is just as important as what you make," intoned the distinguished voice of Will Lyman. "At BMW, we don't just make cars. We make joy."



Some of the print ads showed the car only in fragments, emphasizing a small child clinging to the steering wheel above an all-caps "JOY IS IMPATIENT" headline, or a montage of model badges above the words "JOY CAN BE COUNTED."

"The idea was largely driven by Jack [Pitney]," McKenna said. "It's joy, and who doesn't like joy? Who doesn't like showing the human, emotional side of BMW?"

Probably no one, but within days the ads had inspired sharp criticism. The Wall Street Journal said that BMW had "parked 'the ultimate driving machine, at least for a while. The slogan still appears in the ads, but only in small print. Many of the ads also suggest cars aren't what BMW is offering. The text reads, 'At BMW, we don't [just] make cars. We make joy.'"

The Autoextremist's Peter DeLorenzo was even more scathing. "You don't just walk away from one of the most memorable and accurately descriptive advertising themes in automotive history 'for a while' as BMW says, and expect to blissfully escape any lasting repercussions or long-term effects."

A month after the Joy campaign got underway in the US, this author discussed it with Pitney at BMW of North America headquarters. Pitney defended the campaign as an antidote of sorts to the popular perception not of BMW itself but of BMW drivers.

"Independent third-party research always seems to say that people have a very good opinion of the brand from a technical competence standpoint, but they equate BMW drivers with aggression and

arrogance," Pitney said. "That's why we're working to be more inclusive and add a bit more humanity in the way we talk about the brand, to try to make us a bit more approachable. What's nice is that it actually has changed perceptions of the brand. It's made us a bit warmer and more approachable, and it seems to be helping bring more new customers to the BMW family."

Perhaps, but the ads themselves and the subsequent media coverage had created confusion—and distress—among BMW's most loyal customers. Some responded by sending Pitney death threats for his supposed "parking" of The Ultimate Driving Machine, even



JOY IS MATERNAL.

BMW CITIZENSHIP
A commitment to the future of the world.

though the tagline was still present on the ads. As disturbing as that was, Pitney said, "I'd rather have that passion for the brand rather than just send things out there and wonder. This is a good thing. This is a very good thing."

O'Donnell agreed. "It's great. It proves that there are passionate BMW loyalists out there," he said. Nonetheless, O'Donnell acknowledged, minimizing The Ultimate Driving Machine tagline hadn't been universally appreciated. "I've been shocked, almost horrified, by the number of dealers who've come up to me and said, 'What the hell is this? You're giving up The Ultimate Driving Machine?' No, we're not!"

Despite the controversy, and despite having debuted in the midst of a global financial crisis whose effects would linger for years, the Joy campaign helped BMW's sales increase from 195,502 cars in 2009 to 220,113 cars in 2010. (So did the incentives on auto sales within the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, enacted under President Barack Obama.)

Before the yearly sales total could be announced, Pitney was killed in a tractor accident on August 26, 2010—days before he was set to take a new job as head of BMW NA's Eastern Region. He'd be replaced as VP of Marketing by Dan Creed, promoted by O'Donnell from the Aftersales Division.

Shortly thereafter, GSD&M announced that it would not seek a renewal of its contract with BMW, which was set to expire at the end of 2010. Prior to GSD&M's announcement, digital media agency KBS+P had been assigned to create BMW NA's Super Bowl ad for early 2011—a responsibility that normally would have fallen to GSD&M. Following a review, KBS+P was awarded the entire BMW of North America account in September 2011.

KBS+P's Super Bowl ad promoted the 335d to the tune of David Bowie's "Changes." It juxtaposed other manufacturers' sluggish, soot-belching diesels with what narrator Chris Pine described as BMW's "clean, quiet, and powerful" Advanced Diesels. The word "Joy" was nowhere to be seen, though the 335d's driver was clearly having fun. Instead, The Ultimate Driving Machine appeared at the end, returned to its rightful place as the ideal descriptor of BMW's cars.

Though the partnership with KBS+P had been fruitful, BMW of North America put its advertising account up for review in 2018. The contract was awarded to San Francisco firm Goodby, Silverstein and Partners, which had made its reputation with the "Got milk?" campaign. Goodby, Silverstein knows a good tagline when it sees one, and the agency has left The Ultimate Driving Machine where it belongs, in a prominent position in every BMW ad.

—end—