

Before Creating the Car, Ford Designs the Driver



A model depicting Antonella, the imaginary woman who was the guiding personality for the Ford Verve, a design study that was the basis for the new Fiesta.

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ANTONELLA is an attractive 28-year old woman who lives in Rome. Her life is focused on friends and fun, clubbing and parties.

She is also completely imaginary.

But her influence is definitely real. It is evident in the design of the Ford Fiesta, on sale in Europe now and arriving in the United States next summer as a 2011 model.

Antonella was the guiding personality for the Ford Verve, a design study that served as the basis for the latest-generation Fiesta. A character invented by Ford designers to help them imagine cars better tailored to their intended customers, she embodies a philosophy that guides the company's design studios these days: to design the car, first design the driver.

Antonella is the personification of a profile created from demographic research about the Fiesta's target customer, said Moray Callum, executive director of Ford Americas design.

Ford is using characters like Antonella to bring a human element to the dry statistical research drawn from polls and interviews. Based on psychological profiles, these characters are a more modern version of the "theme boards" that designers once covered with snapshots and swatches of material to inspire a design. They are also like avatars, those invented characters used in online games and forums to symbolize a participant's personality.

"Invented characters get everyone on the same page," Mr. Callum said. "Personalizing gives context to the information we have. Sometimes the target demographics are difficult to relate to by, say, a 35-year-old male designer.

"We found in the past that if they didn't understand the buyer, designers would just go off and design something for themselves," he added.

Murat Yalman, Ford's director of global advanced product strategy, is a strong supporter of an approach that personalizes the ideal buyer for everyone involved in a vehicle's development.

"You get a common focus for everyone from the clay modeler to the chief executive," he said.

The method brings statistics to life. "It creates very memorable ideas that live on after the meeting or presentation," Mr. Yalman said.

So Antonella is joined by Natasha, Ashley, Kristen and other characters from Ford's imagination, each depicted in a Dewar's profile type of write-up, and with images grabbed from the Internet. Antonella has her male counterpart in Anton. Jack is the presiding personality for the 2010 Taurus. Joe and Cal are the ideal characters for future trucks.

Antonella cares more about the design and function of her telephone than that of her car. Her priorities in the Fiesta are visible in the car's central panel, where controls inspired by those of a cellphone operate the audio and air-conditioning systems. Designers working on the Fiesta referred to the shape framing the dashboard instruments as "Antonella's glasses."

Ford's goal in using made-up characters is that they will help produce cars that transcend national traits and are instead built around international, psychological archetypes. Antonella is an extreme version of a type the Ford designers call the fun-seeker.

"There are fun-seekers in London and Cleveland," Mr. Callum said.

But the image of the fun-seeker appears sharply etched and more extreme when set in Rome. "In Rome there are lots of small cars," Mr. Yalman said. "They are always dodging each other. So a car there has to be nimble and it has to look the part. Romans have been conscious of how their vehicles look — all the way back to Caesar. Every little crease of their toga has to be just right."

Mr. Yalman first found the composite characters useful when he began directing marketing efforts for Ford in Europe. Confronted with many boundaries of nation and language, he said, he looked instead at common values and attitudes, a process he referred to as mindset segmentation. “We did a value and attitude map,” he said.

Mr. Yalman found that archetypes like Antonella, the type he called hedonistic, existed in all countries.

The approach ties in to Ford’s efforts to create the Fiesta and other models as global products, with equal appeal in the Americas, Europe and Asia.

Mr. Callum said the technique could be used to help imagine concept vehicles as well as production models.

Ford’s Lincoln division showed the Lincoln C design study, an idea for a smaller future luxury vehicle, at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit last January. It was built around Natasha, a tech-savvy “social achiever” driver.

The designers imagined her life in detail in a video, “A Day in the Life of Natasha.” Several human models were screen-tested before one, who looks vaguely like Audrey Hepburn, was chosen to appear in the video. The video was also convenient for explaining the car to the press and public. It shows Natasha using a new generation of computer interface for the car’s information systems.

The Ford Transit Connect Family One Concept, shown at this year’s New York auto show, was created around Ashley, a very different character from Natasha. Ashley is billed as “a cool mom” who, like the vehicle, represents an update of traditional family priorities. In her profile, according to Ford’s internal research documents, Ashley’s “friends are part of her family.” She dresses up like her children at Halloween. She shops at T. J. Maxx, H&M and Target.

The concept van offers a vision of a post-minivan, post-S.U.V. family hauler with constant Web access. It includes an electronic tagging system for children’s backpacks, skateboards — and perhaps even dog collars — using the radio-frequency identification system Ford offers in some of its trucks; the tags help contractors assure that tools are collected when the work day is over.

Jack, the inspirational character behind the 2010 Taurus, is “the life of the party,” according to Earl Lucas, head of exterior design for the car. “He cares what his car says about him. He wants to be seen in an American car and he is involved in the community.”

Joe and Cal, the fantasy owners of the pickup truck of the future, are what Mr. Yalman called “the heroes of their neighborhood.”

Using psychological archetypes and patterns is more important when designing for younger people, Mr. Callum said. Some younger buyers invest less emotion in their vehicles than their elders did. “This can be hard for us to understand.”

Ford's involvement with the technique can be traced to 2002, said Mr. Yalman, when Daniel Kahneman, a cognitive psychologist and behavioral economist who taught at Princeton and other universities, shared the Nobel in economic science.

Mr. Yalman had been following Dr. Kahneman's work for some time, and the prize marked the ascendance of a wider new emphasis in economics on the psychological side of decision making. Dr. Kahneman is a proponent of "hedonic" choice, which explores ideas of pleasure and preference in buying choices and questions older, rational models of buyer behavior based simply on price or other hard factors.

"What this thinking suggested to us is that emotion played a much larger role than we thought," Mr. Yalman said.

The new economic theories supported Mr. Yalman's ideas. The choice to buy is not just about more horsepower per dollar or segment-leading rear legroom; design is critical, Mr. Yalman said.

"Before, all our cars in Europe were taken as Germanic," he said. "So we dialed up the style." Ford in Europe rolled out a more emotional exterior design language, called the kinetic look.

"We had done lots of models based on rationality, but now we are recognizing that emotions play a much more dominant role than we ever admitted," Mr. Yalman said. "In buying a car, you have to fall in love."

He added: "We now focus quite a bit on aspirations and dreams."

These can be embodied in products. "Think of someone who has a really high-end parka in which you could climb Mount Everest. But the person only wears it on the train to work."

So far, sales of the Fiesta have been strong. It is Ford's best-selling car in Europe, and it was the No. 2 seller over all in that market for the first half of 2009.

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