

A One Way Street

By Jacqueline Mitchell

African Americans like imported vehicles, particularly Japanese-made cars, but other than offering quality products, those auto companies have traditionally done little to attract black car buyers. But times have changed.

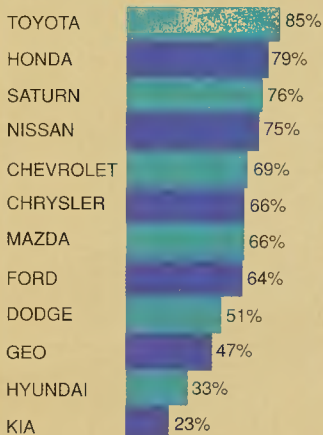
General Motors, Ford and Chrysler have significantly narrowed the quality difference between themselves and their Japanese counterparts, with Detroit winning back market share. Now, the biggest challenge for any automaker is to separate its brand from the crowd. Successful companies stand to gain a bigger share of the \$33 billion Black Americans spend on new vehicles.

"We are taken for granted," says one executive at a major black-owned publication. "They are not recognizing the viability of the African-American market."

African Americans tend to prefer imports and hold a high opinion of Japanese makes. According to a survey by research company Allison-Fisher, Inc., in Southfield, MI., 47 percent of African Americans surveyed were interested in buying an imported vehicle in the next six months to four years, compared with 34 percent of all respondents, who said they intended to purchase an imported make. Interestingly, 85 percent of the African Americans surveyed had an excellent/good opinion of Toyota vehicles. And while they had a high overall opinion of Saturn, very few said they'd buy one. The most intended model among African Americans surveyed was the Toyota Camry. The Honda Accord rated second with the Ford Taurus third.

So, what are the Japanese automakers doing to woo African-American car

Car makes rated highest by African Americans

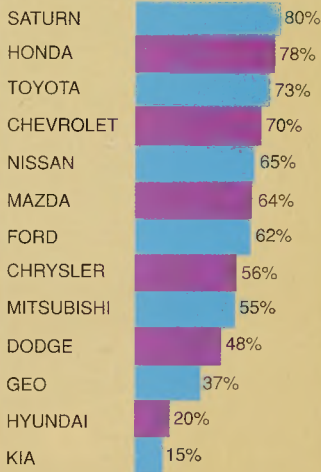


buyers? Toyota doesn't do anything extra to attract black car buyers. Mike Bevan, Toyota's national advertising and merchandising manager, says Toyota doesn't see the African-American market as different from its overall market and, therefore, doesn't target its advertising message to the black community. Bevan adds that the Camry is popular because the vehicle speaks for itself.

Nissan is taking a more aggressive stance, and recently hired Carolyn H. Williams, a black-owned advertising agency, to promote its products among black car buyers. Says Dierdre Francis-Dickerson, Nissan's manager of minority marketing: "African Americans have purchasing power. And if we don't start offering them an invitation to buy, there are a lot of other products out there for them."

Honda uses the black-owned agency Muse, Codero and Chen to get its message

Car makes rated highest by all respondents



out, but primarily focuses on community service activities. All Japanese auto companies fund community projects in African-American communities.

Auto advertising executives at major black-owned publications say advertising from Japanese auto companies has slackened over the years, with the exception of Nissan. The auto companies respond they are simply becoming more selective in advertising in all markets.

Meanwhile, the Ford Taurus once again beat the Honda Accord and Toyota Camry in a three-way race to be the top selling car in 1996. "While there surely isn't a black car, there's definitely something called a black car buyer," says Ken Smikle, editor of Target Market News, a Chicago-based research firm analyzing the black consumer market. "The carmaker who learns to speak to me in my language and culture is the one most likely to get my attention and dollars."