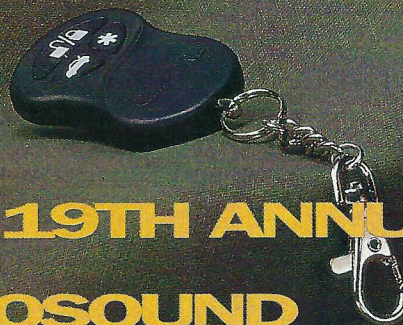


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Demo cars: Fast and fancy

Manufacturers are competing on a highly creative battleground to demo their wares in the hottest ride

BY MICAH SHEVELOFF

Advertising and marketing studies have indicated that it is of paramount importance to create a lasting first impression. Aftermarket 12-volt electronics manufacturers have numerous trade shows, promotional events, and their loyal retailer base hungry for a marketing strategy with visceral impact. As the industry has matured and the audience for such products has grown in size and become more product-savvy, ultra-creative demo vehicles have become the weapons of choice in the battle to win a place in the minds and hearts of consumers and retailers coast to coast.

Tricks of the trade shows

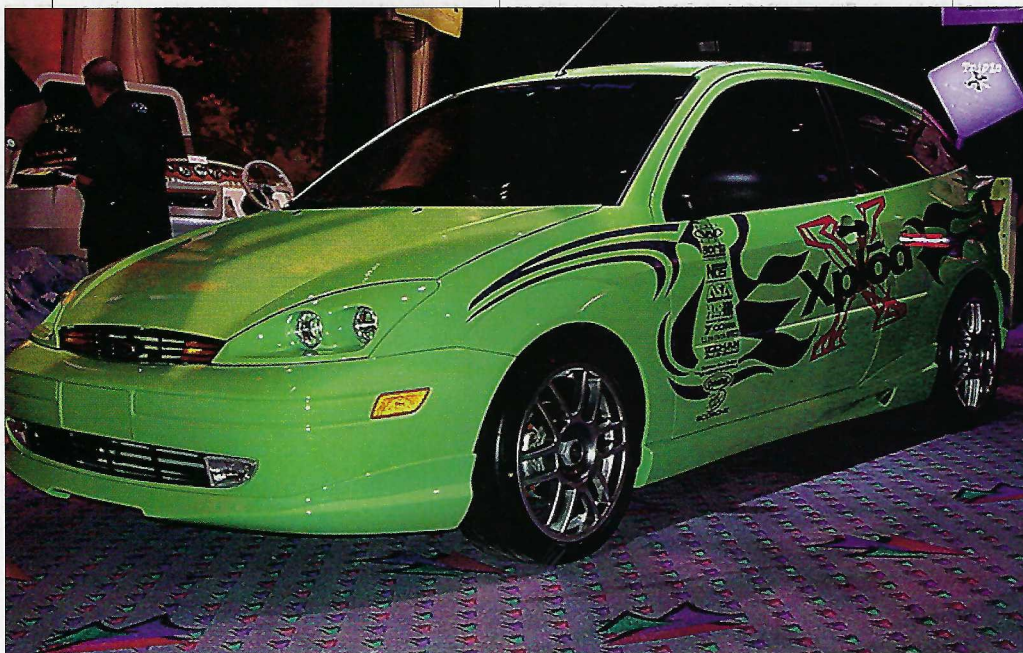
The demo car mania has evolved into an art form all its own. The hours of planning and promotional dollars allocated to these projects have reached an all-time high.

However, most manufacturers agree that the excitement created by these rocking and rolling sculptures justifies the massive scope of the projects.

Leif Blackmon, director of mobile audio for loudspeaker manufacturer Boston Acoustics, has very specific goals for the cars he places out in the field, and attributes much of their success to the careful planning that goes into their placement at strategic events. "Our priority is to showcase our products," Blackmon explained. "In our VW Beetle and Audi TT, we can be certain that everything is set up correctly to optimize performance. We can 'wow' people, both sonically and visually." The Boston Acoustics cars also feature aftermarket performance parts such as wheels, suspension components, and custom seats to add to the overall visual impact that the vehicles have on tour. Boston Acoustics has partnered strategically with the

manufacturers of aftermarket accessories such as Neuspeed, HRE Wheels, Pirelli, Enkei, Yokohama, and Alpine Electronics, who provided the video, navigation and amplification for the Boston Acoustics demo cars. It is not just about audio any more, says Blackmon. It is about an integrated package designed to make the vehicle perform better.

Sony is another company known for its ability to make a splash with cool demo cars. After displaying its wares in tricked-out Dodge Dakota pick-up trucks, Sony has unleashed its 2001 promotional campaign featuring a fleet of 10 (count 'em) Ford Focus ZX3 three-door hatchbacks painted in a 30-year-old eye-popping Chrysler color called Limelight Green. Sony felt it could reach a different audience with the ZX3, especially the 'GEN-Y' tuner crowd (referring to the young drivers who like to sport-tune small, nimble and economic vehicles). Coincidentally, the ZX3 has developed quite an aftermarket following, making Sony's choice of demo car nothing short of ideal. "The cars underwent a complete transformation," explained associate marketing manager Andrew Sivori. "First, they went off to the paint shop for their dramatic color change to the Limelight Green, an off-the-shelf paint that could easily be bought in case a repair became necessary. Next, each ZX3 went to a performance tuning shop, where they were outfitted with suspension parts, wheels, tires, exhaust, and a high-performance four-wheel disc brake system. Once the tuning shop had completed its work, the cars were sent to a



Sony's ZX3 hatchback: green and mean, at the recent Consumer Electronics Show

custom graphics shop in order to receive their XPLOD colors and logo." Each little Ford went through all of this before anyone started work on the stereo system!

The Sony Tech Center is located in New Jersey, and Brian Czifra and his dedicated team of installers was in charge of turning the Z3 into the ultimate merchandising tool, a whopping 10 times! Recognizing the challenges of having to construct 10 identical show car systems, Czifra instructed his crew to build prototype pieces for the first ZX3 and create molds, greatly simplifying the process of repeat assembly on each of the additional cars. Once the audio systems had been designed, the Tech Center crew also integrated two video monitors and a custom fiber optics system (used instead of neon) to highlight the outrageous workmanship throughout the vehicles. Anticipating that the hatchback door would be left open during shows and events, the ZX3 systems were designed to make as dramatic an impact from the rear of the car as they were from the front.

One of the highly respected creative minds in demo car design and construction is David Rivera, known for years in the 12-volt industry as 'Fishman.' Rivera has broken new ground as an installer, constructing vehicles featuring sculpted fiberglass, machined alu-



Not exactly a "demo car," this Jet Ski was outfitted by David Rivera to showcase the latest MB Quart speaker gear

minum, and James Bond-like motorization. Manufacturers such as MB Quart, Jensen, Lanzar, Pyle, and MA Audio have all sought to make a big splash with a demo car constructed by Rivera, president of Miramar, FL-based Fishman Audio Enterprises. "I like to build something unique, something different each time," he says. Different has not been a problem for Rivera, who along with his head installer, Manuel Machavo, has already constructed an audio system on a Jet Ski (for MB Quart), and a multimedia system including a motorized video monitor on a golf cart

(for MA Audio). Among the projects Rivera is currently working on is another audio system for MB Quart built on-board a specially imported BMW C1 motor scooter.

Rivera tells the story of waking up at 4:00 a.m. with the concept of the golf cart burning in his brain. He ran out the next day and bought every golfing magazine he could find to learn about the little buggies. He convinced the staff at MA Audio to turn him loose on the project, bought a \$2,500 used golf cart, and stripped it to the frame. "People were telling me that the thing looked like the Flintstones' car, so I knew I had a long way to go." Rivera and Machavo integrated an audio-DVD system including an LCD screen that rises up out of a hidden compartment via motorization.

Dan Witkowsky, the technical and marketing director for the Anaba Group that owns MA Audio, was blown away by the impact that the golf cart had when it debuted at the USAC World Finals in Kansas City. "The cart drew crowds of people over to our booth, and suddenly I had their attention!" Witkowsky was very pleased with the return on investment MA Audio received from Rivera's creation. The Anaba Group also uses a Dodge Quad-cab pick up truck, a Rolls Royce, a VW Beetle, and a van in its demo car fleet. The golf cart is the latest



Show-car showman Rivera mugs for the camera in a golf cart he designed and made sure to equip with a video monitor, a DVD player, and a sun roof — for better visibility

addition to its mobile marketing efforts.

Working the circuit

Designing and building the demo car is challenging enough; however, it is equally important for the manufacturers to be certain that the vehicles are seen by the desired audiences, and at the proper events nationwide. As an example, the manufacturers' booths at the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas are littered with vehicles, highlighting new products to retailers, product reps, and some consumers. Retailers excitedly pile into the demo cars, eager to experience the technology they will be presenting to consumers in their stores during the coming year. Manufacturers prepare in advance for such an event, tuning and adjusting their systems to look and sound spectacular. "We carefully script what software will be used to demo the systems," explained Blackmon of Boston Acoustics. "We have specific CDs that highlight imaging, bass, or general tonality." The Boston Acoustics vehicles travel to different types of events, appearing at trade shows, college campuses, spring-break gatherings and authorized-dealer showrooms. Blackmon also searches for valuable alternative venues, such as performance parts industry events. When scheduling allows, Blackmon has allowed his strategic partners (supplying wheels, tires, or other accessories for the Beetle or the TT) to display the Boston Acoustics cars at their trade events. "Most importantly though, we like to get the cars out to our retailers," he says. "As a manufacturer, it is our philosophy to support them whenever possible and it helps to establish and maintain our relationship with our dealer-partners."

Sony's fleet of 10 ZX3 hatchbacks will be spread out regionally across the United States, and will appear at virtually every major event where the market focus is on

the GEN-Y male. "We will support our dealer network coast to coast, as well as attend big events such as

looking forward to attending upcoming events with its new BMW C1 scooter, which features a seat warmer, a cell-phone holder, a hand warmer on the throttle, a place for a portable CD player, and a briefcase holder, all as standard equipment.

David Rivera's favorite story regarding the outrageous MA Audio golf cart occurred at the USAC World Finals in Kansas City. Towards the end of the event, Rivera happened to be demonstrating the DVD video system to two kids, a brother and sister waiting for their ride home.

After cranking up the sound and motorized LCD display, the six-year old girl proclaimed, "This thing is more fun than Disney World!" Rivera was touched. The Anaba Group's Witkowsky was equally as enamored, feeling very positive about the upcoming Tour De Americas show schedule that his five demo cars will be soon embarking. Witkowsky expects to expose his products to over one million people this year, attending such events as Hot Import Nights, low-rider shows, and the traditional car audio events. The cars will also be assigned by regional reps to support their network of retailers in smaller communities, and to be present at local events when schedule permits.

Manufacturers have tremendous confidence in the impact and exposure that they will gain from constructing a unique demo car. From the theatrics of flashing lights and motorized panels to the refined sound of multi-channel DVD, the advancements in mobile electronics technology are best displayed in the environment for which they were intended, out on the open road (or river).

Retailers can make excellent use of these marketing tools by creating excitement not only with the consumers, but with the salespeople in charge of their showrooms. The concept of the demo car is to inject a pure dose of fun into the process of demonstrating and selling mobile electronics technology.

A six-year-old girl, when shown the various features of the Rivera demo golf cart, exclaimed, 'This thing is more fun than Disney World!'

the NOPI show (Number One Parts, Inc.) scheduled for the fall in Atlanta. There are 70,000 to 100,000 spectators expected to attend that one show alone," explained Sony's Sivori. The Limelight green ZX3's will also be seen at DB Drag events, Soundoff competitions, and spring break at Daytona Beach, FL. If Sony dealers are planning a promotional event, they can reserve a car through their regional rep on a first-come first-served basis. Use of the cars is not tied to retailer's cop funding in any way, and Sivori expects that with a fleet of 10 vehicles, the attendance record of the ZX3s should be superb.

MB Quart had an excellent year on the show circuit in 2000 — certainly the only car stereo manufacturer to show up with a Jet Ski as a demo vehicle. "We just received a ton of press coverage," explained Joe Brosnan, director of marketing Services. The Jet Ski found its way (by trailer) to IASCA events, local and national sound-offs, trade shows, and authorized dealers. "The Jet Ski represented something new and different, and drew quite a crowd. It highlighted our philosophy as a company, that anything is possible when it comes to car audio." MB Quart does use traditional cars as well (A VW Jetta and a BMW 540i); however, the show-stopper this past year was the Jet Ski. Building on the success of its Jet Ski program, MB Quart is