

Comfy Ride

Car Magazine Writers Sometimes Moonlight For Firms They Review

They Also Rake in 'Freebies' From Auto Companies And Double as Advisers

An Enthusiast, Not a Reporter

By JOSEPH B. WHITE

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

DETROIT—At Car and Driver, America's largest magazine for car buffs, the writers and editors like to get close to their subjects. Very close.

Editor William Jeanes says he encourages staffers to be "consultants" to auto makers, the better to get early access to new cars and inside dope. That meant staff editor Tony Assenza could, for a fee, help Suzuki Motor Corp.'s advertising agency prepare publicity materials and a training film for sales personnel. Then Mr. Assenza reviewed two Suzuki vehicles in the magazine, describing the Sidekick as "a well-aimed rifle shot," and the Swift GTi as "a basic, sturdy, off-the-shelf nickel rocket."

No big deal, says Mr. Assenza, who left Car and Driver last November to work for one of Honda Motor Co.'s advertising agencies. He says the reviews, which appeared in November 1988 and February 1989, were untainted because of his own integrity, and that of Car and Driver's editors. He notes that deep in his positive review of the Swift, for example, he calls the steering "heavy" and the suspension mediocre. "I'm not afraid to bite the hand that somewhat feeds me," he declares.

All for You

Welcome to the world of automotive enthusiast journalism, where the barriers that separate advertisers from journalists are porous enough for paychecks to pass through—as well as airline tickets to Japan, free rooms at fancy resorts, gift certificates, clocks, briefcases and, of course, free use of some of the hottest new cars on the market.

Once an isolated niche among specialty magazines, the major "buff books" are growing mightily in size and influence. The Big Four—Car and Driver, Motor Trend, Road & Track and Automobile—now boast 2.9 million readers; their combined advertising revenue (\$137.8 million) has surged 33% since 1987.

Auto makers, meanwhile, want every edge they can get in their increasingly

What's New

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Business and Finance

STOCKS SURGED AGAIN, pushing the Dow Jones industrials to a record close of 2821.53, up 19.95, in heavy trading. But there were signs that the rally, sparked Friday by speculation of lower interest rates, was quickly losing steam. Bond prices also posted solid gains, sending long-term interest rates lower, but their advance also weakened in late trading. The dollar continued to decline.

(Stories on Pages C1, C21, C2 and C13)

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A new antitrust ruling by the Supreme Court made it tougher for manufacturers or distributors to be sued for putting a cap on retail prices. Experts said the decision is a victory for consumers because it allows manufacturers to cut retail prices largely without fear of a competitor suing.

(Story on Page A3)

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Petroleum prices rose sharply on reports that OPEC has been cutting crude production by as much as 700,000 barrels a day since the group's May 3 accord. There also was news of cutbacks in North Sea output.

(Story on Page C14)

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The Treasury urged Congress to require Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and five other financing agencies to seek triple-A credit ratings. But the move raises concern that homeowners' costs could rise or that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac might have to curb buying loans for low-income housing.

(Story on Page A2)

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Black & Decker is expected to name a Chrysler executive, Michael Hammes, to head the company's \$2 billion power-tools division.

(Story on Page A3)

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Business inventories were virtually unchanged in March, a sign that managers are avoiding any buildup in stockpiles that could lead to a recession. Sales climbed 0.6%.

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Comfy Ride: Writers at Car Magazines Stay With Sources—Through 'Freebies' and Con

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Nissan and its dealers distribute them.

Such qualms, however, aren't the norm. Most buff-book writers and editors say the favors they get from car makers don't compromise the magazines' integrity. "I can't think of a time when either I or a member of my staff has modified his judgment because the knowledge of that product was the result of a trip someone paid for," says Automobile's Mr. Davis.

Buff books aren't the only publications bending the traditional barriers between editorial and advertising. Fashion writers, for example, are often invited to act as design advisers and plied with free gifts, says Alan Millstein, publisher of the newsletter Fashion Network Report. "The wall between advertising and editorial at most fashion publications is translucent," he says. "It's like the skin of an onion." In fact, a recent article in the Columbia Journalism Review worried that a number of magazines in a variety of fields are "selling their editorial integrity" to woo advertising.

The automobile buff books present a special case. It isn't a \$400 snite or \$30 of cosmetics they're writing about. The products they review constitute the second biggest purchase—next to a house—many of their readers will ever make.

That isn't to say that buff books don't write negative reviews. Car and Driver, for example, can be downright biting. It recently said the V-6 engine in General Motors Corp.'s new S-15 Jimmy "feels and sounds like a V-8 with two plug wires pulled." Automobile last December chronicled how the 1988 Lincoln Continental it tested racked up seven visits to the shop and \$1,995 worth of repairs (some covered by warranty) in less than 31,000 miles.

What's more, buff-book editors say it isn't in the character of broad-ranging enthusiast magazines to follow the prim example of, say, Consumer Reports, which doesn't accept free use of cars for testing, accept free trips for its reporters or allow employees who write its car reviews to free-lance for the auto makers.

(The Wall Street Journal also forbids those practices, although the newspaper did accept free use of "test" cars until 1966. Since then, The Journal has rented these vehicles from the auto makers.)

Finding a Niche

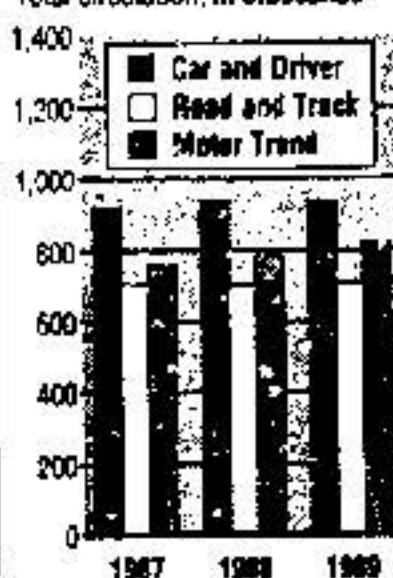
Each of the major buff books tries to cultivate a distinct character. Motor Trend, owned by Petersen Publishing Co. of Los Angeles, emphasizes domestic models and tends to be the most generous in praising them. Car and Driver has a tongue-in-cheek flair; for the April issue, technical editor Csaba Csere reviewed the ride of the SSN 700, a nuclear submarine. Road & Track, which along with Car and Driver is owned by Hachette, of Paris, France, aims for fans of road-racing and exotic European sports cars. Automobile, owned by a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., tries to be an Esquire for car connoisseurs.

Car makers want the same thing from buff writers that movie producers want

Auto Magazines in High Gear

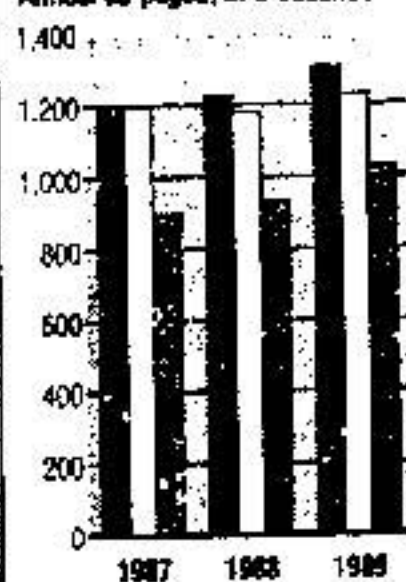
A Stable Audience...

Total circulation, in thousands



And More Ads...

Annual ad pages, in thousands



luxury division, it invited about two dozen buff-book writers for a free two-day stay at the plush Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills. Oldsmobile last year played host to the buff press at the Stouffer Pine Isle Resort near Atlanta.

At such events, it is a longstanding custom for car makers to present gifts to the writers. During its Georgia sojourn, for instance, Oldsmobile handed out \$25 gift certificates for the resort's pro shop. A few writers gave the certificates back, but most didn't, an Olds spokesman says. Buff writers say gifts are usually worth less than \$50, but car makers have handed out more valuable items, such as leather jackets and typewriters.

The auto makers also court the writers to act as design or marketing advisers—sometimes for pay. "They [car makers] say, 'Can we rent one of your guys to look at what we're doing, and tell us if we're on the right track,'" says Mr. Jeanes, the Car and Driver editor. He compares this consulting work to that of a computer-science professor who advises IBM.

Thus Patrick Bedard, editor-at-large at Car and Driver, periodically serves as a paid consultant to auto makers. He helped write a report for GM on how to improve its 1986 Buick Riviera and Cadillac Eldorado. GM paid him "a very tiny amount," says Mr. Bedard, without being specific. "It's not enough to turn my head." He adds: "I do not see myself as a reporter. None of us came to this business to be reporters. We came to follow our car enthusiasm."

Comfort Level

Mr. Jeanes acknowledges that "it doesn't look good" for his writers to take money from car makers. But he notes that the magazine requires writers to inform editors of their consulting work, and to submit their reviews of clients' cars to a "peer review" by other staffers. "I'm quite comfortable in terms of maintaining editorial integrity," he says.

Then there are the awards.

Motor Trend, Car and Driver and Automobile magazines have created a cottage industry in handing out annual accolades to their favorite vehicles. Each year at Mo-

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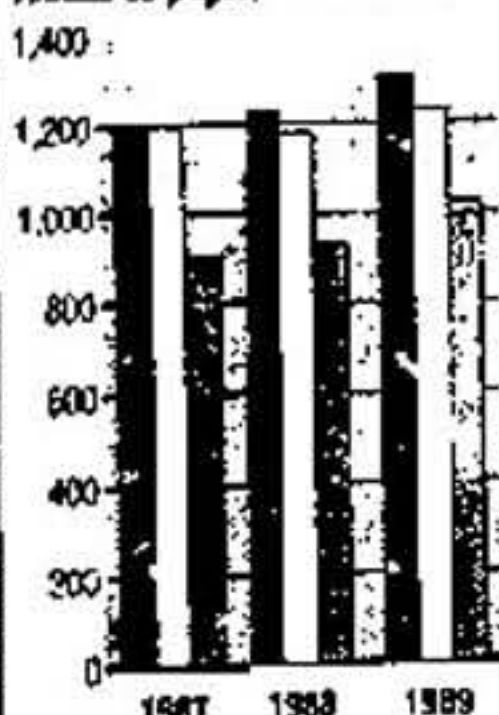
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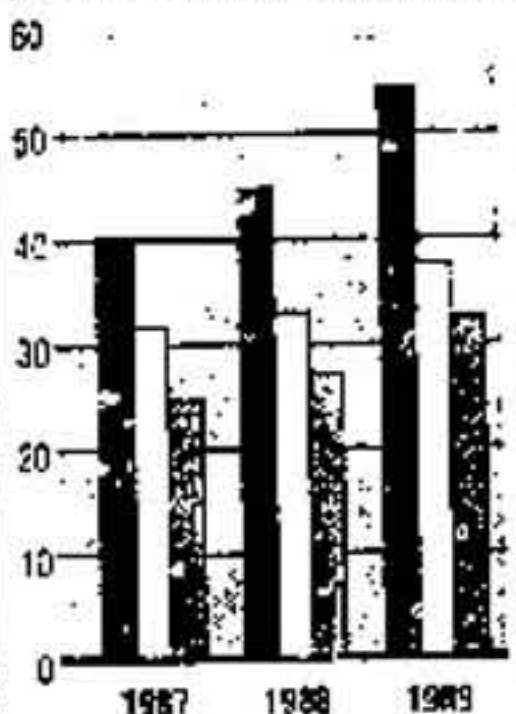
And More Ads...

Annual ad pages, in thousands



Generate More Cash

Annual ad revenue, in mil. of dollars



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magazine's testimonial.

Ford, which in January won a Car of
the Year trophy for its Lincoln Town Car.
Is also running three-page spreads in Mo-
tor Trend. What's more, Ford trumpets its
award (and the Motor Trend name) in ads
that run in other publications.

Car and Driver, meanwhile, publishes
an annual "Ten Best Cars" list. Honda
now runs magazine ads to boast about
making the Car and Driver list eight years
in a row. In these ads, Car and Driver's
name is repeated eight times.

At Automobile, Mr. Davis says he and
his staff simply sit down once a year to
choose both an Automobile of the Year and
a group of Automotive All-Stars. This
share-the-wealth approach made winners
of nine different companies this year.

One of them was Chrysler Corp. The
company was so pleased that its Dodge
Caravan made the 1990 All-Star list (de-
spite being more than five years old) that
it thanked Automobile—in a full page ad
it bought in the magazine's All-Star issue.
"It's enough to make a Caravan blush,"
Chrysler gushed.