

Car manufacturers are more savvy than they used to be with event budgets and they want to reach more diverse audiences

By Mark Williams

There's a moment in an old episode of *The Simpsons* (*Mr Plow*, 1992) when Homer is in a big exhibition hall surrounded by the latest vehicles and he enters a competition to win a car. Standing beside the car on a podium is a glamorous female model and Homer asks her: "Do you come with the car?" She says, "Oh, you", giggles and waves at him. Then another middle-aged man enters the competition, asks her: "Do you come with the car?" and she replies, "Oh, you", giggles and waves at him. You get the idea. It's a microcosm of the kind of male-centric, old-school image that automotive events are eager to leave behind and the reason why diversity is key.

"We ran an event for Hyundai earlier this year where 58% of the people who bought the car are female, so the last thing you want to do is use an event team that is 95% male," says Steve Lang, Director of automotive event specialists Motiv8. "We had a 50/50 split on the team and that was one of the things Hyundai were keen to achieve."

He says the automotive event industry is "mired in traditional values" and that's what his team pushes against. "Automotive events, particularly product launches, have happened the same way since I can remember. You get 200 people in a venue, put on a plenary session and a marketing manager comes out to give a speech and bores people senseless. Then it's a series of 'classroom' sessions and drive sessions.

"We're sick of middle-aged men telling young people how to drive and what to do and how to sell cars. Those days are gone. Our audience is getting more and more diverse, so it's important we relate to them."

Rules and regulations

While automotive events come with their own rules and guidelines, it's not as heavily regulated as industries like pharmaceutical or financial services. As you might expect, the main legislation to be aware of when you have lots of delegates getting behind the wheel of a car tends to be general road law, which can vary from country to country. →

How automotive events are changing gear





David Heron is Co-Head of Black Tomato, which runs incentives for the automotive industry, usually to reward salespeople. He says a multi-day incentive trip will inevitably involve alcohol at some point, so you have to be very careful with your programming.

"We have zero tolerance in terms of drinking and getting behind the wheel of a vehicle," he says. But this can sometimes provide a challenge in the morning if delegates have stayed up late drinking.

"That's when we might use breathalysers so people can test themselves and make sure they're clear," Heron explains. "Especially in countries where there are laws about even the tiniest trace of alcohol in the system."

For Lang, risk assessments are a vital part of the events that Motiv8 runs. "They need to cover a lot of the aspects of driving and we bring in experts to write those assessments," he says.

He also explains that there can be stipulations around the age of drivers for faster cars, to avoid inexperienced drivers under 21 years old getting too carried away in a brand new sports car.

"That's not to say they're excluded from the event," says Lang. "If they come along to the event it's important they can experience the whole day. But that will more likely be from the passenger side."

Legislation such as the Bribery Act 2010, which in many industries means you can't put delegates up in five-star hotels, isn't such an issue for automotive events. Heron says it doesn't apply to sales incentives, adding: "To be honest, star ranking is a bit obsolete and we're more interested in the location, level of service, and USPs."

"We're using a lot of four-stars simply because we're achieving better reward experiences through them," he explains. "However, we're finding a lot of our automotive groups are willing to do expeditions involving camping. That is a different end of the scale, more like no-stars, and is all about the experience you get."

Security is key

From a venue perspective, the most important rules tend to be around security and privacy, says Kevin Leaver, Head of Events at vehicle testing site Millbrook.

"There are various types of testing that go on here that are highly commercially sensitive. In some cases the cars being tested here are three years away from production, so it's incredibly confidential," says Leaver.

"It's interesting having an events business on the same site as a highly secure venue. It presents certain unique challenges and opportunities. For the vast majority of our events, as people come through the gates into the complex we sticker the cameras on their phones or laptops with security seals."

"But we can declare press days where it's ok to photograph events, for example the Society of Motor Manufacturers & Traders (SMMT) annual press day. When those events are happening, prototype vehicles will just be put away, out of sight."

Safety first

Perhaps the most obvious element of automotive events that makes them unique is the potential to crash something very valuable. While both Lang and Heron say they've been relatively lucky in this respect, there are always plenty of precautions taken.

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"We've done supercars and ice driving but we've not had any problems," says Heron.

Lang says if his team is doing a road drive, they install dashcams and plan routes that reduce the chances of an accident.

"We make sure our routes are as safe as possible, for example eliminating right hand turns," says Lang. "That's one of the most dangerous manoeuvres you can make and a driver might not be used to the car's gear change or clutch and stall it."

Budgets have changed

Like many industries that hold regular events, the automotive sector has got better at measuring the effectiveness of conferences, product launches and incentives. There's more control on spending now – it needs to be justified and bring demonstrable results.

"The budgets have changed dramatically over the past 15 years," says Millbrook's Leaver. "It wasn't unusual in the early 2000s to see budgets well north of £1 million for production and venue hire, bearing in mind we're just a venue and don't get involved in content. "Today they are still healthy budgets but they're not what they were."

David Heron believes there are more challenges for the automotive sector now than there were six or seven years ago. And in challenging times, those manufacturers may look at high-end incentive trips as a potential area to save costs.

"Some of our automotive clients are committing more to incentives because they need to increase sales and they know that one of the best tools to do that is to offer rewards. Others see incentives as a potential saving they can cut back on in tough times."

Showing off cars

At the end of the day, the primary aim of the events Motiv8 run and Millbrook host is to get people excited about cars.

"We've got to showcase a vehicle's capabilities so people can pass that on," says Steve Lang. "We've got to get sales staff enthusiastic – someone once told me that 'sales is the transfer of enthusiasm'."

"So we do that in a variety of ways. One way is experiencing the vehicle fully and that means driving the car."

"And if you want to show the car to the best of its ability, you can put delegates in a car with a professional racing driver behind the wheel and scare the bejesus out of them! That's one of the most thrilling parts of an automotive event, being with an expert who can show you what the car can really do."

One of the biggest challenges of automotive incentives, says David Heron, is that the automotive industry has been using them to motivate staff for a long time and is already very good at them.

"The sector has historically been at the very top of its game when it comes to incentives," he says. "They have used travel incentives as a sales tool for decades and it's been successful. It's a competitive marketplace and it's a must [for car brands] to be seen as having the best incentives."

"A lot of them will work with dealers who sell multiple brands under one roof. Why would you work harder to sell one brand over another? You need to make sure your incentive is better than the competing ones out there."