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Bill Ford takes chamois to namesake automaker's image

Updated 4/16/2006 10:17 PM ET

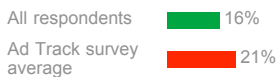
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By Theresa Howard, USA TODAY

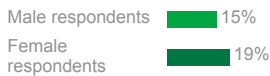
Ad Track: A weekly look at how much consumers like a major advertising campaign compared with other ads rated by this poll - and how effective they think the ads are in helping to sell the product.

Today's ad: Ford

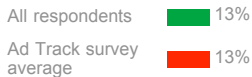
Like the ads a lot



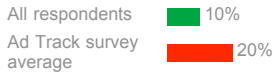
Among key target groups



Dislike the ads



Think they are very effective



Based on a nationwide poll of 876 adults who had seen the ads. Poll conducted Feb. 7-9; margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points. Overall average based on 498 ads. To subscribe to Harris Ad Research Service, contact David Krane of Harris Interactive at 212-539-9648 or at dkrane@harrisinteractive.com. [Click here for previous Ad Tracks.](#)

NEW YORK — Detroit automakers may not have much to toot their horns over these days, but Ford can at least give a little beep-beep to its corporate image, thanks to help from Bill Ford.

The great-grandson of founder Henry Ford has appeared in ads for Ford since the fall. It's his second stint as on-camera company spokesman. He first appeared in ads in 2002, shortly after becoming the company's CEO.

The latest ads, a corporate image campaign, shows Ford in a showroom or with engineers talking about product innovation and safety. It teams the Ford name with the company's Volvo brand, which has a reputation for its safety standards.

"The Bill Ford ads really address the problem that Ford has, which is being pretty stodgy as a company," says auto-marketing expert Art Spinella, president at CNW Market Research. "What the ads do is raise awareness of the brand. How positively they do it is up to the ads, but people do like them."

And, he says, putting leaders in ads generally appeals to consumers. "People love to know there is someone in charge of a big company."

Getting favorable attention for Ford in the current market climate is no easy feat. Ford light-vehicle sales are down 2.9% for the first three months of 2006, while the industry overall is up 2.6%, according to WardsAuto.com.

In January, Ford was in the news with the announcement that it would eliminate up to 30,000 plant-related jobs and idle 14 manufacturing facilities, including seven vehicle assembly plants, by 2012. It also said it would reduce the equivalent of 4,000 salaried positions and prune the company's officer ranks by 12% in the first quarter. The sweeping restructuring plan —

dubbed "Way Forward" — aims to establish the foundation for long-term, sustainable profitability.

"It's not a time when everything is rosy," says Josh Gottheimer, director of strategic communications. "Despite the story, we're out there building innovative cars and trucks."

While the ads with Bill Ford began in October, one ad began airing soon after the announcement to try to make the case that the whole auto industry is going through tough times. In the ad, called "Rebirth," Ford tells viewers that the "auto industry is facing new challenges" and that competition calls for the rebirth of America's "innovative spirit."

"We realized Bill has a wonderful last name, which is deeply invested in what goes on at Ford Motor Company," says Gottheimer. "He really resonates with people because his name is on all the cars that go off the line."

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Given the touchy topic of a corporate overhaul, the ad still had appeal with consumers polled for Ad Track, USA TODAY's exclusive weekly survey. Of those familiar with the ad, 16% like it "a lot" vs. the Ad Track average of 21%. In better times, an ad with Ford as spokesman bettered the average by a percentage point.

Women liked the "Rebirth" ad more than men did: 19% gave it the top rating vs. 15% of men. And while just 10% of respondents consider the ads "very effective," vs. the Ad Track average of 21%, more than 52% rated the ad "somewhat effective."

In the ad, Ford speaks easily and does not read from a script. Most of the monologue consists of his answers to questions posed from off-camera.

"Bill has a great way of communicating," says Gottheimer. "No one believes more in this than he does. No one wants to succeed as much as he does."

Posted 4/16/2006 10:04 PM ET

Updated 4/16/2006 10:17 PM ET

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