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White paper

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The Top Five Automotive Slogans of all time – what makes them so great?

“If you have a really good thing, it will advertise itself,” was a piece of advice that American automotive pioneer Henry Ford was fond of repeating. He even went to the extreme of saying that advertising was “an economic waste”¹. And, to a certain extent, he practised what he preached. When demand for its Model T was at its highest, between 1917 and 1923, the Ford Motor Company ran no advertising.

¹ https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=SudV13L6mkoC&pg=PA126&lpg=PA126&dq=if+you+have+a+really+good+thing+it+will+advertise+itself&source=bl&ots=eX6LWaE7-l&sig=yJ3MdXgQLj1U1ChjWHmr-oQmSMk&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKFwj64fXAxLHWAhXGuhoKHfhMC_4Q6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=if%20you%20have%20a%20really%20good%20thing%20it%20will%20advertise%20itself&f=false

Nevertheless, when markets became more competitive, advertising became a key strategy for Ford. And even when the company itself chose not to advertise, it contractually required its dealers to run approved adverts in local press, such as the 1922 ad “Buy a Ford and spend the difference”², which rather ironically featured none other than the face of Henry Ford, the advertising agnostic, in a prominent position.

Slogans (sometimes known as taglines) have played an important role in the cultural history of the automotive sector, helping to define brands and capture the imaginations of the car-buying public. But not every one hits the mark. Take, for example, Audi’s “Truth in Engineering” campaign which ran in the US in 2015 at a time when its parent company, Volkswagen, had just been revealed as cheating on data emissions for its diesel-powered cars. A car-buying public from Wyoming to Washington was less than impressed by this emphasis on the brand’s “integrity” at a time when its owners had been found guilty of widescale deception.

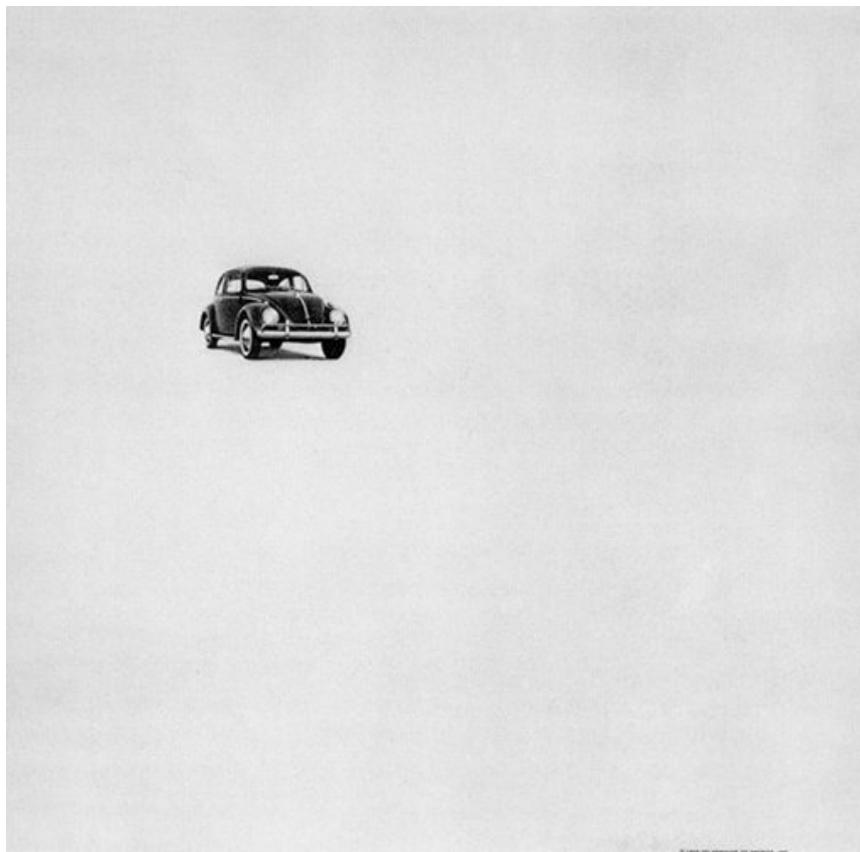
That said, there has been a huge range of automotive slogans that have helped to characterise brands in words with the precision of a surgeon’s knife. What are the factors that make the best ones stand out from the crowd (and more importantly, sell vehicles)? Creativity, humour, wordplay, surprise and laser-sharp linguistic messaging with the strictest economy of words are some of the key common features. We take a look at our Top Five Automotive Slogans of all time to find out more.

1. Think small – Volkswagen

“Think small” is a campaign for the Volkswagen Beetle dating back to 1959 that, four decades later, was named as The Greatest Ad of the 20th Century by *Ad Age*. So what exactly made it so special? To understand its influence, it helps to take a look at the context. In 1950s America, the automotive market was dominated by so-called “muscle” cars boasting bigger engines, faster speeds, and ever snazzier chrome finishing. In short, these cars, designed by home-grown household names such as Ford, Chevrolet and Buick, had become statements of status, wealth and living the American dream. So how was a German manufacturer with associations to the Nazi Party going to sell a diminutive and unflashy car named after a bug to a US market less than 15 years after the end of WW2?

² <https://www.thehenryford.org/explore/blog/advertising-the-model-t/>

The answer, as devised by ad agency DDB, was to radically rethink the way a car could be marketed and, in so doing, change the course of advertising itself. Instead of trying to compete with the ever more powerful US sedans and coupes that were filling the highways and parking lots, VW challenged its audience to perceive a car in an entirely new way: "Think small", accompanied by an iconic black-and-white image of a Beetle on a white background, was the beautifully simple slogan that challenged the natural assumption that bigger was necessarily better. In fact, the ad makes a point of saying that this car won't even go above 72mph and so won't stand a chance of keeping up with other so-called "fastbacks". But, and here is the crucial point, it goes on to say that the Beetle is so advanced and reliable that it will "cruise right past gas stations, repair shops and tire stores". And, when you come to think about it, spending less on fuel, service and parts is pretty attractive to most car owners.



Think small.

Our little car isn't so much of a novelty any more.

A couple of dozen college kids don't try to squeeze inside it.

The guy at the gas station doesn't ask where the gas goes.

Nobody even stores at our shape.

In fact, some people who drive our little

flivver don't even think 32 miles to the gallon is going any great guns.

Or using five pints of oil instead of five quarts.

Or never needing anti-freeze.

Or racking up 40,000 miles on a set of tires.

That's because once you get used to

some of our economies, you don't even think about them any more.

Except when you squeeze into a small parking spot. Or renew your small insurance.

Or pay a small repair bill.

Or trade in your old VW for a new one.

Think it over.



2. Vorsprung durch Technik – Audi

If we leave aside Audi's mistimed "Truth in Engineering" tagline for one moment (see above), the German luxury car manufacturer can be credited with creating perhaps the most recognisable automotive slogan of all time. Its origin came about in a moment of marketing serendipity, when founder of ad agency BBH Sir John Doyen was visiting an Audi factory in Germany in order to gain insight into how to sell these cars to British drivers. On the wall, he saw a sign saying "Vorsprung durch Technik" and inspiration struck home.



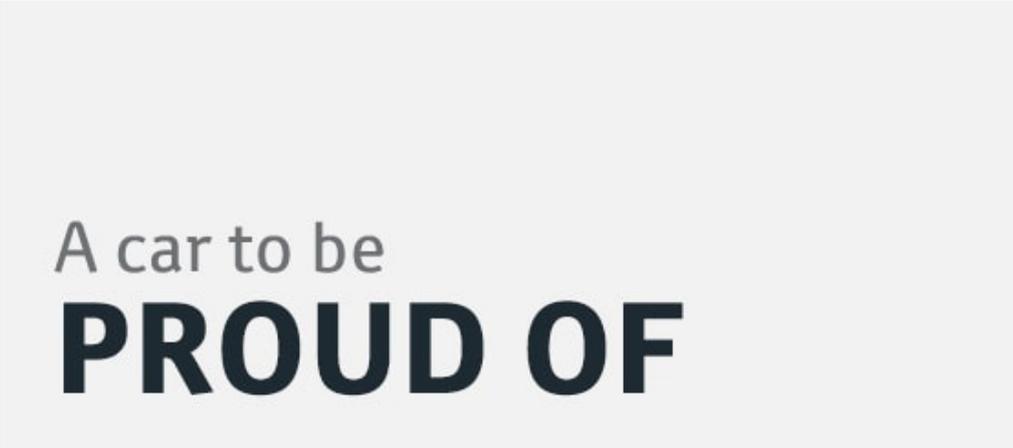
The phrase translates as "Advancement through technology", which, frankly, sounds rather cold and lifeless in English. But Doyen's masterstroke was to preserve the phrase in its native form and simply present it to the UK audience as is. Along with photography or print ads featuring the inevitable engine-purring mountain climbs and sleek lines of a high-performance vehicle, the consonant-rich German phrase gave the brand a slight sense of mystique and uber-cool engineering heritage. Its power comes from the fact that most of its intended audience did not know exactly what it meant (other than that it must be something to do with technology) – its sense of "otherness" makes it more alluring and aspirational.

In fact, the phrase was so widely recognised that it has become part of the vernacular, featuring in the British sit-coms such *Only Fools and Horses* and *Peep Show*; in songs by Blur and U2 (*Parklife* and *Zooropa* respectively); and even as the punchline to a joke in the British gangster film *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. By anyone's standards, it is a slogan that has travelled extremely well.

3. A car to be proud of – Toyota

In the 1990s, Japanese automotive manufacturers were still emerging forces in the European and American markets, known for producing cars that were efficient and affordable but offered little in the way of the emotional connection that ties so many consumers to their favourite brands. In 2002, Toyota commissioned Saatchi & Saatchi to produce a campaign for the launch of its latest Corolla model that would break this image of conformity and anonymity. The ad agency responded with a series of award-winning TV spots and a slogan that is now part of automotive marketing folklore.

In [one of the most successful ads](#), a young schoolgirl runs through the playground and belts herself up in the backseat of a gleaming new Corolla parked just outside the gates. The driver, who is actually waiting for someone else, turns to her unexpected passenger and asks "Isn't your mummy over there?" With a devilishly delicious backhand, the youngster retorts: "Just shut up and drive!". Fade to black and we see the tagline that pulls the whole ad together: "The new Corolla. A car to be proud of."



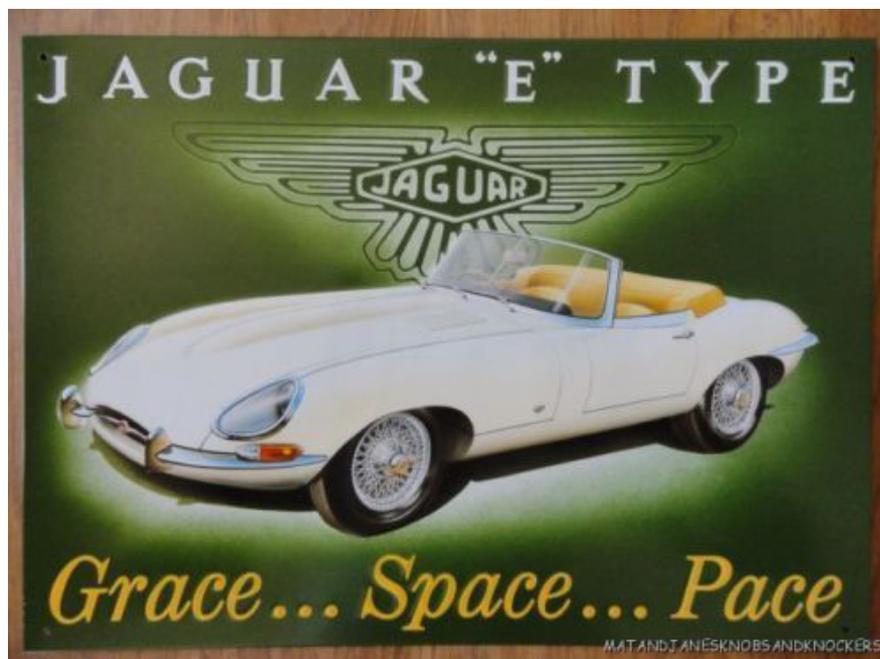
A car to be
PROUD OF

The ad cleverly appeals to its adult audience's understanding that no demographic is more severe in its judgment of what is socially acceptable than those who are not yet old enough to drive. The power of the slogan is in its brevity and simplicity. Building on the shock and humour induced by the impertinence of its young star, the slogan is a brilliantly uncomplicated way of reinvigorating the image an everyday car with a new lease of life.

4. Grace, space and pace – Jaguar

Jaguar is one of the world's most iconic luxury performance car brands, synonymous with understated British elegance and precision engineering. In the 1960s, Jaguars were known both for their sporting success – as multiple winners of the famous Le Mans 24-hour race, for example – and as the four-wheeled transport of choice for a host of household names from royalty to film stars.

When it first appeared in print campaigns in the swinging sixties, the slogan “Grace, space and pace” managed that seemingly effortless (yet, of course, incredibly hard) feat of becoming a well-known phrase that became almost part of the vernacular – at least in the automotive world.



What makes it work? For a start, its triple-rhyme in a three-word phrase makes it immediately memorable – the words trip off the tongue as if they were always meant to go together. Then, of course, it's all about capturing the essence of the brand with the ultimate economy of words – something this slogan excels at. What differentiates a Jaguar from its luxury competitors? It is elegant and refined rather than aggressively styled (“grace”), it offers the ultimate in comfort and ease of travel (“space”), but, let's not forget, this is a performance thoroughbred with a winning track record (“pace”). Combining brevity and catchiness, we think this is a luxurious masterpiece.

5. Volvo. For life. - Volvo

We finish our tour of the Top Five Automotive Slogans of all time with another phrase that would make a haiku look verbose in comparison. Volvo, which means “I roll” in Latin, is a Swedish car manufacturer whose first car rolled off its Gothenberg factory lines in 1927. The company’s aim was to build cars that could endure the tough roads and extreme cold of this northern territory. As a result, the brand soon developed a reputation for extremely durable and reliable cars that were, above all, very safe to drive.

Although it was acquired by Ford Motor Company in 1999, the Volvo brand remained distinct and continued to have an unrivalled global perception for safety, backed up by years of advertising featuring unusual approaches such as showing how crash-test dummies fared in a simulated car accident. In the same year of the acquisition by Ford, the manufacturer launched its new global tagline: “Volvo. For life.” Two words absolutely capture the key brand proposition: these are cars that will protect you and your loved ones from danger, and that once you’ve driven one, you won’t want to drive anything else. Compact in expression yet hugely expansive in meaning, we think this is another highly commended entry into the Automotive Slogan Hall of Fame.



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