

VW determined to be a domestic automaker

By SUZIE ROLLINS SINGER

Volkswagen employees are tired of being called foreigners.

Now that the German automaker has set up its western world headquarters in Troy and is building its third U.S. manufacturing plant in Sterling Heights, that image will change.

"We want to be considered a domestic auto maker, so naturally we came to Detroit. We want to buy American-made supplies as well," said Tom McDonald, VW public relations director. "In order to maintain our U.S. position we felt we had to be closer to the production and development pipeline to serve the market."

The company is providing thousands of jobs for Americans, even though it still sells thousands of imported cars here. Aside from employing 500 professionals and occupying seven floors of the City Center office building, VW expects to employ 3,500-4,000 factory workers at the Sterling Heights plant.

Totally VW employs 10,000 Americans in its three U.S. plants in addition

to the 40,000 people employed in Volkswagen dealerships," McDonald said.

"When we came here in 1977 we were a new company. We were a melting pot of the auto industry, and we have an obligation to the communities we live in."

VW's AMERICAN operation was launched in 1955 when the automaker first began importing the Beetle. Most can remember the car's ads boasting its flexibility and priced at only \$1,995. But as American emission standards clamped down, the Beetle became too expensive to sell in this country, and imports ceased in 1977 after 20 million "Bugs" were sold, McDonald noted.

Without even a year's wait, VW hopped on the bandwagon and began producing car and truck component parts in Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Texas.

The Sterling Heights facility will assemble complete cars, although McDonald wouldn't reveal the exact vehicles. When fully operational in

about a year, about 800 cars will roll off assembly daily, for a total of 180,000 vehicles per year.

"We should be open for production in the summer of '82 for the '83 model year," he added. "We'll produce the Rabbit and pickup trucks and other Rabbit-based vehicles."

The front-wheel-drive Rabbit is VW's success story replacing the Beetle, McDonald said.



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"THE RABBIT is our bread and butter car. It's a volume car. The Rabbit has been sold in the U.S. for six years. It's a hallmark for which other small cars are being produced. It popularized front wheel drive in small cars and offers the small diesel engine as a popular option for small cars," he said.

"For the 1981 Rabbit, we've made more changes than ever before," he said, stressing "changes have never been just for the sake to change but always for improvements. The basic en-

gineering concept remains the same."

Management's commitment to quality has brought Volkswagen its respect, McDonald said. "We have a proper product that's engineered right. We've come to this country as a leader in small car technology. We're not a Johnny-come-lately. We're an innovator. We've taken the concept of fuel efficiency and quality and put it in a package."

VOLKSWAGEN'S competition helped shift the philosophy of American auto companies to production of smaller cars, McDonald believes.

"American companies weren't paying close attention to what people wanted. Their philosophy was 'bigger was better.' Now that gas is twice as expensive they are paying more attention to buyers' tastes," he said. "Now in addition to competing with the Japanese, we're also competing with the X-cars and the other small American cars."

Talk of taxing imports vigorously

doesn't bother McDonald, even though most of VW and Porsche-Audi cars won't be produced in America. Heavy import taxes won't come to pass, he believes.

"With the trade policies of this country, it can't afford to be selective and protective. It operates on the free trade principle and the world operates on a two-way street of trade," he added.

Even without full scale production of all of VW's models in the U.S., McDonald said its presence in America is known and respected. The company is helping bring business into a sagging American economy.

"Probably the happiest guy in town in the corner gas station owner because that's where we fill up about 155 of our cars," he added.

Today Volkswagen yields 3 percent of the American car sales market. "But by 1985 we're looking at 5 percent of the American market," he added. By that time, the company expects to be selling between 500,000 and 600,000 imported and domestic vehicles in this country.

Cheatham performs in winter jazz fest

Brian Cheatham of Farmington performed in the fourth annual Winter Jazz Showcase at Ferris State College in Big Rapids. The Showcase, presented in conjunction with the 1981 Festival of the Arts, was held Feb. 11 in Starr Au-

ditorium.

Cheatham, a member of the Jazz Lab Band, plays the drums. The Jazz Lab consists of 20 musicians including saxophones, trumpets, trombones, guitar, bass, piano and drums.

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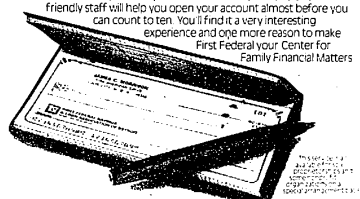
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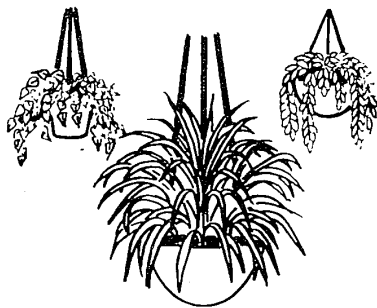
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