

# GM's cars, not people, should do the talking

A couple of years ago, the guy sitting next to me in a midtown Manhattan watering hole, on discovering I wrote about the auto industry, asked, "Do you think GM will make it?"

With a would have been mindless flattery except that the questioner was an editorial writer for the Los Angeles Times. He seemed blissfully unaware of the economic implications of his question, including the fact that GM, through its acquisition of Hughes Aircraft, was the biggest employer in California.

After this conversation took place, GM lent the questioner some substance by obliging the questioner with a five-point drop in market share. Then Ford stepped up GM in profitability, and we had the shining antics of Ross Perot.

MAYBE IT was about time for

GM to rent the back room of the Waldorf Astoria to lay those fears to rest.

Which was how I found myself back in New York in an intimate gathering of 14,000 invitees to hear an impromptu state of GM address called on the eve of the annual auto show season. The purpose ostensibly was to improve GM's image with the cold shower approach — a direct presentation of the positive things GM has accomplished with \$45 billion in front money.

This was the home team here. But I couldn't help picturing GM chairman Roger Smith coming up Park Avenue on a horse, lance slightly askew, into the flailing arms of the New York press corps.

EVEN BEFORE the show began, the Wall Street Journal had compared the event to Gary Hart at-



auto talk  
**Dan McCosh**

tempting to explain his fondness for boat rides.

It was a cheap shot, but pretty much in line with the rapping GM has been taking in recent years. GM's image is a mixture of fact and fiction, like any auto company's.

The business press of late has managed to portray some basic business moves as having sinister overtones — particularly the huge investment GM has made to modernize its plants. New buildings end up characterized as building overcapa-

city, while tearing down old ones is harped on as evidence GM is going broke.

ON THE other hand, the decline in GM's market share is unprecedented. It didn't help that GM's biggest new-car launch in 20 years was overshadowed by the stock market crash.

Insiders at GM say the Waldorf event, despite its size, was a last-minute decision that canceled a lot of Christmas vacation time. Originally each division had been planning a series of concept cars for the

auto show circuit beginning in Detroit next week that were supposed to define the image its cars were to project.

But top brass, after reviewing the show display cars, thought they ought to be together in a show all their own. It was to be both a future-looking technical tour-de-force and a relaunching of the '88 model year production cars.

EVEN SURROUNDED by milling waiters, the cars were an impressive show. Most were running, not just styling exercises, and Buick, Chevrolet and Cadillac had cars on display close to what will be in the showrooms in the mid-1990s.

But cars don't speak for themselves, or at least it's not the nature of public relations to let them. Neither, it seems, can they put their foot in their mouths without some help.

Chairman Roger Smith left more than a few mouths hanging open when he answered the first question from the audience about why GM doesn't sell a low-cost family car by saying GM's answer was a "two-year-old Buick." Affordability apparently hasn't come along with technology.

FURTHER ATTEMPTS at explaining the intricacies of GM's new cost base, organization plan and image-building goals were pretty much sidetracked after that one, at least during the formal presentation. The cars held the promise, not the speeches.

I seem to remember someone in the auto business once saying, "Never complain, never explain."

Dan McCosh is the automotive editor of *Popular Science*.

## datebook

**CHRISTIAN BUSINESSMEN**  
Friday, Jan. 15 — Full Gospel Business Men's Christian Fellowship meets in Farmington Information: Stanley Marcetelle, 464-7291.

**SMALL BUSINESS**  
Saturday, Jan. 16 — Free small business management workshop begins at 10 a.m. in Troy. Information: 442-4220. Sponsor: Small Business Management Schools.

**BUSINESS GOALS**  
Saturday, Jan. 16 — "From Entrepreneur to Business Person" offered 10 a.m. to noon in Troy. Fee: \$30. Information: 649-8646. Sponsor: Start A Business Store.

**NEW BUSINESS WORKSHOP**  
Monday, Jan. 18 — "Start Your Own Business" workshop offered 7-9 p.m. at 2080 W. Big Beaver, Troy. Fee: \$25. Information: 649-8646. Sponsor: Start A Business Store.

**REAL ESTATE EXECS**  
Monday, Jan. 18 — Doug Ross, director of the Michigan Department of Commerce, will address the Michigan Association of Corporate Real Estate Executives at 11:30 a.m. at Southfield Charley's, 19701 W. 12 Mile. Information: Paula Cometto, 653-7370.

**LEGAL ASSISTANT**  
Monday, Jan. 18 — Legal assistant diploma program offered in Rochester. Information: Nadine Jakobowski, 370-3120. Sponsor: Oakland University.

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**FINANCIAL PLANNING**  
Mondays, beginning Jan. 18 — Personal financial planning certificate program offered at Adams High School, Adams and Tienken roads, Rochester Hills. Information: Nadine Jakobowski, 370-3120. Sponsor: Oakland University.

**GROWING NEW BUSINESS**  
Tuesday, Jan. 19 — "From Entrepreneur to Business Person" workshop offered 7-9 p.m. at 2080 W. Big Beaver, Troy. Fee: \$30. Information: 649-8646. Sponsor: Start A Business Store.

**APPRAISERS TO MEET**  
Tuesday, Jan. 19 — American Society of Appraisers meets at 8 p.m. in Southfield. Information: Kathy Southern, 625-2774.

**UTILITY OPERATIONS**  
Tuesday, Jan. 19 — Chairman of Consumers Power speaks at Engineering Society of Detroit's construction luncheon in Detroit. Information: 832-5400.

**RETIREE INVESTING**  
Tuesday, Jan. 19 — Determining financial status and choosing appropriate pension and profit-sharing plans will be examined 7-9 p.m. in Rochester. Fee: \$5. Information: 370-3120. Sponsor: Oakland University.

**CONFUSED BY THE NEW TAX LAW?**  
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**LOTUS 1-2-3**  
Tuesdays and Thursdays, Jan. 19-20 — Using Lotus 1-2-3 will be taught 6:30-8:30 p.m. in Rochester. Also will be taught 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Feb. 2 and 4. Fee: \$150. Information: 370-3120. Sponsor: Oakland University.

**START A BUSINESS**  
Tuesdays, Jan. 19 through Feb. 23 — "How to Start a Successful Small Business" offered 7-10 p.m. in Troy. Fee: \$300. Information: 542-4220. Sponsor: Small Business Management Schools.

**MANAGING FOR PROFIT**  
Tuesdays, Jan. 19 through Feb. 23 — "Managing for Profit" offered 7-10 p.m. in Troy. Fee: \$350. Information: 542-4220. Sponsor: Small Business Management Schools.

**DP MANAGEMENT**  
Wednesday, Jan. 20 — Data Processing Management Association meets in Southfield. Information: 535-4400.

**HOME-BASED BUSINESS**  
Wednesday, Jan. 20 — "Home Based Business" workshop offered 10 a.m. to noon at 2080 W. Big Beaver, Troy. Fee: \$25. Information: 649-8646. Sponsor: Start A Business Store.

**RECORDS MANAGERS**  
Wednesday, Jan. 20 — Association of Record Managers and Administrators meets in Birmingham. Information: Sharon Rose, 486-2275.

**LIFE UNDERWRITERS**  
Wednesday, Jan. 20 — Greater Detroit Association of Life Underwriters meets in Southfield. Information: Nancy Simon, 353-7444.

**INVESTING WHILE RETIRED**  
Wednesday, Jan. 20 to Feb. 10 — "Investing in a Decade of Change" will be offered 7-9 p.m. in Rochester. Fee: \$20. Information: 370-3120. Sponsor: Oakland University.

**PURCHASING MANAGEMENT**  
Thursday, Jan. 21 — Purchasing Management Association of Detroit meets in Farmington Hills. Information: 363-5200.

**IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY**  
Thursday, Jan. 21 — Free seminar on improving productivity and profits using the Ask Manman computer system at 8:30 a.m. at the Somerset Inn in Troy. Information: Cindy Kryzanowski, 349-8200 Ext. 2530. Sponsors: Ask Computer Systems, Peat Marwick Main & Co., Seidman & Seidman/BDQ, Hewlett-Packard.

**BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES**  
Thursday, Jan. 21 — "How to Choose the Right Opportunity" workshop offered 7-9 p.m. at 2080 W. Big Beaver, Troy. Fee: \$25. Information: 649-8646. Sponsor: Start A Business Store.

**MORTGAGE WOMEN**  
Thursday, Jan. 21 — Association of Professional Mortgage Women meet in Birmingham. Information: Polly Lawshe, 666-9359.

**WOMEN'S BUSINESS OWNERS**  
Thursday, Jan. 21 — National Association Women's Business Owners

meets. Information: 864-3300.

**RUN A BUSINESS**  
Thursdays, Jan. 21 through Feb. 25 — "How to Run a Successful Small Business" offered 7-10 p.m. in Troy. Fee: \$300. Information: 542-4220. Sponsor: Small Business Management Schools.

**MONEY MANAGEMENT**  
Saturday, Jan. 23 — Short course on money management 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. in Bloomfield Hills. Fee: \$15, including lunch. Information: 540-8710.

**DESKTOP PUBLISHING**  
Saturdays, Jan. 23 through Feb. 13 — Desktop publishing class on Macintosh computers offered from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in Rochester. Fee: \$115. Information: 370-3120. Sponsor: Oakland University.

**FUNDAMENTAL IBM PC**  
Saturdays, Jan. 23 to Feb. 13 — Operating an IBM personal computer will be taught 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in Rochester. Fee: \$115. Information: 370-3120. Sponsor: Oakland University.

**ENGINEERING REFRESHER**  
Mondays and Wednesdays, Jan. 25 through March 30 — Part I Professional Engineer refresher course will be offered 6-9 p.m. in Troy. Information: 832-5400. Sponsor: Engineering Society of Detroit.