

The end of World War Two left the German Nation in total ruins. Although Germany would once again rise as an economic giant within years of the war, many firms had great trouble re-establishing their identity immediately following the end of the war. Ultimately, the Cold War would help catalyze the American consumer world to make amends with Germany in a form of Capitalistic solidarity against the rising tide of Communism. In fact, the consumer marker of being “Made in West Germany” and later “Made in Germany” would come to reflect the ultimate success of a reformed democratic Germany in the eyes of American consumers.

Volkswagen, a firm touted by the American media as being “Hitler’s Car”¹ in the 1930s and early 1940s would come to idealize the changing identity of being “Made in West Germany”. In fact, the highly recognizable firm would not only re-invent itself as a successful icon of the economic miracle of the 1950s, but rather, Volkswagen would continue to represent the changing idea of “Germany” for American consumers for years to come.

Although multitudes of successful German products today have well documented associations with Nazi Germany, few firms have had the impact of Volkswagen on consumer attitudes towards products “Made in Germany”. Although the Cold War helped rush consumers into accepting West Germany as a modern democratic state, much of Volkswagen’s success can be directly linked to the development of solid advertising campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s. As a result, the success of the Volkswagen as a German built icon has helped institutionalize a universally accepted identity of quality for

¹ 67, Getting The Bugs Out

German made products of all types. Even today Volkswagen continues to help define “Germaness” in the eyes of consumers.

Hitler’s Car to Herbie, the Capitalism Love Bug

American views of Germany following World War Two were obviously not very high. Not only had a whole generation of young men been forced to fight in a foreign war instigated by the rise of Nazi Germany, but the nation as a whole had been transformed into a fully function war machine poised to preserve freedom against the rise of German Fascism. Americans from all walks of life were inspired to help the nation in the ultimate battle for freedom. No one had been left unaffected by the war. Furthermore, the massive generation of young men who had felt first hand the wrath of war were returning home, starting families, and transforming the nation into one the most economically powerful empires in world history.

In Germany, the story would not have such an auspicious start. Not only was the defeated nation left in ruins as a result of the war, but the tremendous death toll of World War Two had wiped out a massive portion of the population. Furthermore, companies that had managed to survive the war and re-establish themselves would find the rise of the 1950’s American economic generation to be both a blessing and a curse.

Although the Cold War would help tremendously catalyze the West Germany economy following the war, the ill feelings against German made goods would linger for years to come. As a result, German firms would experience great turbulence in their attempt to disassociate themselves away from Germany’s Nazi past. Although the Allies

had ended the war with a revolutionary progressive plan to denazify, decartelize, and demilitarize the German people, consumers would not be so methodically purged of lingering feelings towards the German people. In fact, German firms continue to deal with their past even today.

Along with feelings of anger against Nazi Germany, the lingering feelings of World War One would add an extra variable to the already difficult task of re-inventing a “German” identity to the consumer world. Germany had already been defeated and re-founded once before with hopes reform, but the rise of the Nazis not 15 years after the fall of the German Empire would no doubt amplify the distrust of consumers. What guarantee did the world have against the rise of another German Monster? In the minds of consumers, the hope of a “reformed” German Nation was still a major question. Luckily for post war German firms, the rise of the Cold War would bring American consumers into a close relation to their West German counterparts as partners against the threat of communism.

For Volkswagen, the mistrust and association of the firm as an idealistic representation of the Nazi War Machine would be one of the most pressing issues of re-establishing the company. This was amplified as a result of Hitler’s highly successful propaganda machine. The Volkswagen would be displayed to the world as the brainchild of Hitler himself. Furthermore, the propaganda machine made sure to market the Volkswagen as an essential component in Hitler’s prized *Volkskultur*. In the eyes of consumers, Volkswagen was the physical embodiment of Hitler’s prized *Volksauto*.

Along with the idea of the Volkswagen as an idol of Hitler’s Germany, the Volkswagen would find its “Germaness” to be a potential curse in many other ways. For

example, importing the Volkswagen to America would place it in direct competition against long standing American car companies. These same American automakers had laid down consumer production in order to push out military vehicles for use against the German war machine. Although representatives from Volkswagen had based much of their design and production methods on American methods learned from a 1937 trip to the Ford Factory², the fact was simple... Volkswagen was a German car.

To add to this formidable association, the Volkswagen was one of the most recognized vehicle designs used by the Axis powers throughout the European theater.³ In fact, the Volkswagen would become such a dominant vehicle in the Axis workforce that it would continue to be used even through reconstruction.⁴ It even gained a small, but strong following from allied leaders, who had seen first hand the durability and reliability of wartime Kubelwagens in North Africa.⁵

Although Volkswagen appeared to have an upward battle to regain respect as a re-established firm, the Cold War would cause the whole game to change. Germany would be transferred into a beacon of reform. At the forefront would be the iconic Volkswagen; a firm whose factory was quite literally ten kilometers from the East German boarder in Wolfsburg, Lower Saxony. As a result, the rise of 1950s consumerism would make the Volkswagen one of most respected icons of a reformed Germany and a true marker of what it means to be “Made in West Germany.” The Beetle would as Volkswagen declared itself become “the symbol of the economic miracle.”⁶, a representation of the

² 80, Battle for the Beetle

³ 35, Getting The Bugs Out

⁴ Chapter Two, Battle for the Beetle

⁵ 60,75, Getting The Bugs Out

⁶ 54, Made in Germany

success of a “transformed Germany... from demoralization and defeat into a nation that could in peace if not in war challenge and compete successfully with the nations of the world.”⁷

Being Small in a Big World

Volkswagen officially introduced the Beetle to the US in an unorganized and sporadic fashion following the German Currency Reform of 1948. Until the mid 1950s, the Beetle and less popular Transporter would be imported through a small and disorganized association of specialty importers who firmly believed in the car, but were not adequately resourced to be major dealers. As a result, the Volkswagen gained a healthy following, but supply could not keep up with demand.⁸ By 1958 Volkswagen held roughly two percent⁹ of the US market, but the demand for the Beetle was rising exponentially.

As the popularity of Volkswagen grew, its identity as a “German” automobile began to take a more concrete form. In a time where the majority American buyers appeared to be in love with the massive fin-tailed land yachts of 1950’s Detroit, the Volkswagen was quickly becoming a potential threat to the American market. In just six years, the importation of Volkswagen’s grew from 367 in 1951 to 61,507 in 1958.¹⁰ By 1960 the firm would be exporting 127,159 Beetles to the American market, many of which were imported through unlicensed grey market dealers.

⁷ 58, Made in Germany

⁸ 171, The Beetle in America

⁹ 71, Getting The Bugs Out

¹⁰ 171, The Beetle in the USA

As much as the Cold War would help to change attitudes towards Germany following the end of the war, Volkswagen was still subject to having a tainted image. They would need to smartly utilize the Cold War in order to fully project themselves as a successful symbol of a reformed West Germany. Luckily, the firm was quick to acknowledge the gift of the Cold War and was smart enough to utilize it for their advantage.

Volkswagen immediately realized it did not make the type of product idealized in Detroit and saw an opportunity to differentiate itself as a totally unique product. Not only did it create a place for itself in the auto industry, but rather Volkswagen saw itself as the leader in re-vitalizing the widely renown respect of “German Engineering” in the minds of American consumers. After all, it would be the first German Auto maker to restart production after the end of the war.¹¹ In the words of Volkswagen’s own post war chief, Heinz Nordhoff, “Today, we are known in the world, people are talking about us, they know what work is being done in the Volkswagen factory... our factory and this car have come to represent German industriousness and German skill thorough the world.”¹² Volkswagen produced something totally different- an idea as much as a car.

The Volkswagen soon caught the eye of observant market experts, who felt the allure of the Beetle stemmed from “the incredible quality control- components and whole cars being rejected for defects that an American dealer would not have corrected even if a new owner complained about them.”¹³ *Road & Track* summed up the “Volkswagen Way” when it described the Beetle in 1956 as accomplishing “what no other vehicle

¹¹ 59, Getting the Bugs Out

¹² 56, Made in Germany

¹³ 59, Made in Germany

manufactured outside the USA has ever been able to do: it has gained an unmistakable wheel-hold in the garages and hearts of the American car buying public... Volkswagen fulfills a need which Detroit had forgotten existed... a car that is cheap to buy and run, small and maneuverable, yet solidly constructed.”¹⁴

In order to take advantage of the Volkswagen’s uniqueness, the corporate board in Wolfsburg realized it needed to invest in an advertising campaign to reflect the idea of the Volkswagen. The firm hired an American advertising firm, Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) to head its advertising campaign. At the forefront of discussions between the two parties was the unquestionable purpose and visual identity of the vehicle. The Volkswagen was simple, made at the highest quality, very reliable, and most importantly economically sound. It was this set of ideas that would shape the rapid growth of the Volkswagen Beetle in the American market for years to come.

From an Iconic Idea to Iconic Ads

Early Volkswagen ads attempted to sell something honest and to the point. Unlike car ads of the day, which were as David Kiley, a Volkswagen historian points out, “unrealistic-looking things... dishonest and false,” Volkswagen ads would feature simple photographs and emphasize the realistic qualities of the car. They would, as one Doyle Dane Bernbach employee would suggest, “discovering the advertising from within the company... it was a matter of finding out and soaking up what this company was about, what motivated the people who worked there, and how they felt about the product they

¹⁴ 78, Getting The Bugs Out

were turning out.”¹⁵ As a result, the Volkswagen ads of the late 1950s and 1960s were like the Volkswagen itself: something different. They were visually unique, purposefully designed, and most important: reliable. Consumers would be getting exactly what they saw. No more, no less.

Take for instance the infamous Coca-Cola print ad.¹⁶ In this simple black and white photo advertisement from 1962, only two objects are presented: a Coca-Cola bottle and a Volkswagen Beetle. Unlike the archetypal illustrated car advertisements from American companies, the advertisement is above all a photograph. Furthermore, the virtually undistorted photograph projects the iconic outline of the Beetle in a sea of white space. The only other object projected from the photograph is a small, but highly recognizable Coca-Cola bottle. Other than these two objects, the advertisement is blank except for a small word box under the photograph.

Although this advertisement may seem weak at first, the advertisement sends volumes of information to consumers. It not only reflects the ideals of the purpose built Volkswagen, but more importantly it links something unquestionable German with something unquestionably American, Coca-Cola. Furthermore, the advertisement establishes a connection with a classic American object, which like the Beetle itself, had been virtually unchanged for decades. Unlike American cars of the time, which changed shaped year to year, the bug was something else, a testament to doing things, as Heinz Nordhoff would demand, “right”¹⁷. By this, Nordhoff demanded that Volkswagen ads should, like the car itself, reflect the idea that Volkswagen was dedicated to the

¹⁵ 87, Getting The Bugs Out

¹⁶ 195, All-American Ads: 1960s

¹⁷ 87, Getting The Bugs Out

“attainment the highest quality... to destroy the notion that such high quality can only be attained at highest prices... to give the car the highest value and to build it so that it retains that value.”¹⁸

This idea is further exemplified in a similar advertisement from 1963¹⁹. In this advertisement, a Beetle is shown in the process of being re-painted. In bold text under the once again un-doctored photo, the question of “how to make a ’54 look like a ‘64” is posed. Although Volkswagen had made fourteen changes to the car from 1963 to 1964, the paragraph below clearly confirms “VW’s always look the same because we change the car only to make it work better, never to make it look different... We’ve made over 5 million Volkswagens, and we’re still making changes... not enough to make you run out and buy a new one every year.” In comparison to American carmakers, this was revolutionary.

Along with the idea of presenting the car as an honest expression of quality and value, early Volkswagen ads made sure to advertise the firm in a very non-threatening fashion. The choice was two fold in purpose. Firstly, it sidestepped instigating ill feelings towards Volkswagen. Volkswagen was still a German carmaker invading the American auto industry. Thankfully for Volkswagen, the American carmakers saw the Volkswagen as a “joke on four wheels.”²⁰ It would take Detroit almost a decade after the introduction of the Beetle to realize its true threat.

More importantly, Volkswagen did not see itself as a threat to US makers. American carmakers made their product and Volkswagen made theirs. In fact,

¹⁸ 81, Getting The Bugs Out

¹⁹ 132, All-American Ads: 1960s

²⁰ 176, The VW Beetle

Volkswagen had contemplated running a series of advertisements featuring American cars beside a Beetle with the headline “There’s room for all of us.”²¹ Although this can be interpreted as another attempt of Volkswagen to integrate itself into the American market as “just another option”, it would have no doubt identified Volkswagen as a German contender to the already competitive US auto industry. Luckily, the Volkswagen marketing team back in Wolfsburg realized the danger of such an advertisement and scrapped it. Unbeknown to them, this move would help isolate Volkswagen in a positive way. It would keep Volkswagen uniquely German. Volkswagen would continue this tradition of non-threatening ads for two decades. The firm only introduced “attack ads” in the 1980s. Even today, Volkswagen ads rarely present their product as “competing” against other similar vehicles. As a result, Volkswagen continues to project themselves as something different.

Reinvention or Returning to One’s Roots?

The 1980s and early 1990s would see Volkswagen fall from the graces of the American market. After the introduction of cheap and reliable Japanese cars into the American market, the market strength of Volkswagen would quickly be contained and replaced by such Asian carmakers as Toyota and Honda. Although Volkswagen had started one of the most important movements in the history of automobiles, the 1980s would see the rise of Japanese automakers, which would not only surpass Volkswagen in quality, but also provided a product at much smaller price. As a result, the Volkswagen

²¹ 89, Getting The Bugs Out

would become outdated and struggle for survival for almost two decades. Furthermore, Volkswagen would lose its patriarchal status as the “German Automaker” to firms such as BMW and Mercedes-Benz.

After a dismal existence in the 1980s and 1990s, Volkswagen would once again become a force in the auto world. It would also regain its position as one of the leading firms of German production, although BMW and Mercedes had by now established themselves as elite players in helping to define “Germaness” in the eyes of American consumers.

As a result of the rise of BMW and Mercedes as industry leaders, the definition of “Made in Germany” had been transformed from emphasizing value and quality to projecting an almost elitist idea of perfection. The high-end German automakers had tactfully capitalized on the image of quality Volkswagen had secured over the preceding decades and infused their own demand for performance and luxury. As a result, BMW and Mercedes could successfully demand a premium for the right to own such a precision German designed machine.

Volkswagen would first attempt to rejuvenate itself as a German automaker in the late 1980s with the “Fahrvergnügen” campaign. Volkswagen hoped the use of a German word would both capitalize on its German origins and capitalize on the Nostalgia of the quirky Beetle. Unfortunately, this campaign would ultimately fail for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, the campaign would fail because it projected something very false. The modern Volkswagen was neither a joy to drive, nor was it a celebration of doing things “right” as the Volkswagens of the 1950s and 1960s were. In fact, the modern Volkswagen did virtually nothing “right”. It was neither the quality nor value of

an Asian automobile, nor was Volkswagen able to compete with the luxury German carmakers as the “Ultimate Driving Machine.” Volkswagen had become outdated and overpriced. The sales numbers reflected it. For the first time since the 1950s, Volkswagen sold less than 100,000 Cars in the US.²²

After another few years of simply just surviving, Volkswagen would make an effort to find its place in the world and re-establish itself once more. One of the first tasks of the recently re-staffed American office would be to look at what made the Beetle and early Volkswagens something special. They discovered something very simple: they were different and they did things “right”. Early Volkswagens embodied the ideas set forth by Heinz Nordhoff. Volkswagens were high quality, reliable, and economical. Furthermore, their ads reflected this. In other words, for Volkswagen to be successful, they simply needed to be Volkswagens. They were not BMWs, Hondas, or anything American and the advertisements needed to reflect this.

Ultimately, a re-born Volkswagen would begin the long process of stabilizing its market share in the US by returning to its roots. They would, as one Volkswagen manager would suggest, focus on “having kids, but not becoming their parents.”²³ As a result, Volkswagen would once again focus on doing things “right” and not worry about following archetypes or ideals set forth by anyone but themselves. The success of the “Drivers Wanted” and “V-Dub” commercials speak volumes to this idea.

Quality from Germany, not Quality because it is German

²² 151, Getting The Bugs Out

²³ 194, Getting The Bugs Out

The history of Volkswagen echoes the history of German products in the American market following the Second World War. Although German products would face tremendous issues with a negative identity immediately following the war, the Cold War would catalyze the healing process between American consumers and German producers. Furthermore, the efforts of German companies such as Volkswagen to produce high quality, reliable, and economic goods would foster the development of a positive identity with goods “Made in West Germany” and later goods “Made in Germany.”

As a result, Volkswagen’s reputation was not built on the idea that it epitomized “Made in Germany”. Rather, Volkswagen gained its reputation by producing quality goods that just so happened to come out of Germany. Consequently, this helped foster the idea that being “Made in Germany” was a tried and true marker of quality. Even today, Volkswagen continues to help define “Made in Germany” by idealizing what the Confederation of German Trade Fair and Exhibition Industries calls “a quality concept that encompasses the German economy as a whole... it produces a profile of high quality, one of unmistakable character, one that embodies tried and tested durability and unquestionable acceptance.”²⁴ Without doubt, the ideals of Volkswagen have played a major role in transforming what it means to be “Made in Germany”.

²⁴ 64, Made in Germany

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