

Car dealer tailors customer service to Asian American love for Mercedes-Benz



Everyone has an "it" thing — that something special that defines the ultimate in excellence, accomplishment and pride. For many Asian Americans, that driving force behind turning intangible successes into something real to the touch has been the Mercedes-Benz; and it still is. So much so, that it's become somewhat of a stereotype across generations: you still haven't really "made it" unless you hold the keys to a shiny, new Mercedes-Benz. But researchers are now finding there are reasons why this Jonesist attitude is becoming immersed within Asian popular culture. They are indeed identifying direct ties between what makes the luxury automobile maker tick and the values of the typical Asian American consumer.

Blame part of it on the dowry. Asia's cultural roots with arranged marriages might be relaxing its hold as the years go by, but according to the Suman Marriage Bureau, almost all

arranged marriages among Asians of the same community still involve bargaining for either house property, substantial cash or the mandatory Mercedes-Benz.

The status symbol is apparently not exclusively used for driving either. Even design in architecture is finding itself under the influence. For example, in Southeast Asia, architect William Harold-Wong has studied buildings from the 1960s and 1970s in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. There, he has traced the origins of patterns found on concrete tiles to the Mercedes-Benz star symbol.

Marketing trade magazine "Filipinas" points to immigration as another major factor in creating strong brand loyalties among Asians. It describes the process as such: "When he first comes, the Filipino is adorned in Gucci, only to realize that Gucci is passé and so it doesn't take long for him to figure out that now he has to buy Prada. The

Filipino-born immigrant is most likely to drive a Mercedes-Benz, the status symbol in the Philippines..."

One only has to look at the numbers to understand just how much Asians are buying into its cultural craving for Mercedes-Benz. Mercedes has. Part of its success lends to its aggressive ethnic marketing. The company has long prided itself on innovation and leadership, because through research, it knows these are qualities shared among many Asian American consumers. During the 1990s, Thailand grew second only to Japan as the largest Asian export market for Mercedes-Benz cars, and seventh in the world for export sales.

The incessant chatter that comes with strategic planning and deal making travels around the globe as top retailers and marketers clamor to attract and keep this most loyal and coveted class of consumer. It helps that there is no doubt that the Asian

American consumer is currently among the fastest growing ethnic consumer groups in America.

Even here in the Bayou City, Mercedes-Benz of Houston North's general manager, Walter Weibel, recognizes the importance of good customer service, particularly when trying to reach the Asian market in the United States.

"In today's world, delivering good customer service is expected," Weibel said. "We must go above and beyond to win the customer's loyalty."

As a result, his dealership goes so far as to educate and train his staff specifically on Asian culture and even the psychology of buying habits within this group. So far, the system is paying off, considering Mercedes-Benz of Houston North was listed as "The Best" from Inside Houston magazine under the honor of "Best Customer Service." This is a case in point how companies are practically tripping over themselves trying to get the Asian American consumer's attention, and there are billions of reasons why. Asian Americans buying power will grow to more than \$500 billion by 2008, according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia. Plus, quality on top of quantity doubles and triples the stakes, since Asian American consumers are described as highly educated, ambitious and extremely value-oriented on top of being characterized as the most brand-loyal of customers. Somehow, Mercedes-Benz has been among the leading brands to tap into that source for an extended period of time. Its reward: becoming an icon ingrained within an entire culture.

Mercedes-Benz of Houston North is located at 17510 IH-45 at FM 1960. Visit them on the Web at www.aution.com or call Weibel at 281-233-6000.