

# Cars

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2006

The New York Times

## THE BIG SELL

# The Rewards of Winning Awards

By ROBERT STRAUSS

WHEN the Nissan Xterra won Motor Trend Magazine's S.U.V. of the Year award in 2006, Fred Suckow, Nissan's director of marketing, did not want the opportunity to be wasted.

So soon after the award was announced last October, Nissan began broadcasting a television advertisement where the driver of an Xterra reached down in the midst of his off-road driving to scoop up a model of the trophy for the award.

"I know consumers think the car company ads can spin anything, but this time I thought using a third-party endorsement was too good not to capitalize on," Mr. Suckow said of the Motor Trend award. "It was at the beginning of the launch of the model, and we wanted to make sure customers knew that independent reviewers endorsed it."

Awards for cars and trucks proliferate nowadays. But Motor Trend's Car of the Year stood alone when it was introduced in 1949, though it has since branched into Car, Truck and S.U.V. of the Year categories, and may well be confused with the North American Car of the Year, the World Car of the Year or the European Car of the Year, not to mention the awards given by magazines from Money to Smart Money and Road and Track to Road and Travel.

"When you can grab on to anything and make it an award, then I don't see how you can value any of them," said Jeremy Anwyl, president of Edmunds.com, the Web site for car information. "I'm not sure that many people on the street could tell you which film won the Oscar, but I can assure you that maybe only 1 in 100 could tell you Motor Trend's Car of the Year."

That would be, at least for 2006, the Honda Civic, which also won the North American Car of the Year award. The latter has taken some prestige from the venerable Motor Trend award, which has been given in car and truck categories since 1994. Much like the N.C.A.A. sports polls, the Motor Trend award is voted on by 48 automotive writers and announced at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit each January. Like the Academy Awards people grousing about the Golden Globes, Motor Trend defends its longtime top-dog status.

"It's a rigorous test we put all the cars through," said Matt Stone, Motor Trend's executive editor. "Every one of our editorial staff, about 10 people each year, drives every



Larry Martin

one of the nominees. We rate them on everything — cornering, safety, braking, you name it." He said that any company can nominate vehicles, as long as they are new or substantially changed from the previous year. The manufacturer must also expect to sell at least 2,500 units, and not price each one for more than \$100,000. "Then we get like '12 Angry Men' in a room and hash it out. We are, indeed, like the Oscars of the business. We've been doing it since 1949. Anyone else is following in our wake."

Mr. Stone said he thought a Motor Trend Award, much like an Oscar for movies, can make sales jump. "The fact that they cut Super Bowl commercials and put up billboards with our awards on them is testimony to that," he said.

But figures gathered by Tom Libby of the Power Information Network, a division of the research firm J. D. Power & Associates, are inconclusive. Sales of the Civic, for instance, were up in January and February, after it won its big awards, over the same months in 2005, but were not as high as they had been in the summer, only a few months before. The Civic's share of the compact conventional car market has been between

13 and 17 percent each month for three years now. None of the cars or trucks that have won Motor Trend or North American Car or Truck of the Year Awards have improved sales substantially soon after winning awards, though none have dived in sales, and most have improved.

"What we are basically talking about here is third-party endorsements, and I think they are, especially in the Internet age, already abounding," said Mr. Anwyl of Edmunds.com. He points to his company's Web site, which has statistics and chat boards about nearly every model vehicle. Then there are the Consumer Reports guides, which, he thinks, have the most credibility among potential car buyers.

"You tend to have the belief, I think, that these are awards factories," he said. "Motor Trend, in a way, benefits when Nissan, or whomever, runs an ad with the name of the magazine on it. Other magazines then want to have the same thing, so Road and Track, or some other non-car magazine, does its awards."

Mike Michaels, a spokesman for Toyota in the United States, admits that awards are way down the list of why people may buy his company's cars and trucks.

"Believe it or not, what we have found is that the No. 1 thing that gets someone to buy a Toyota is dealer advice," he said. "Others way up there are Internet advice, information from friends who already own one, Consumer Reports and other automobile reviews. We win a lot of awards, so I would like to say that there was a category up there for them, but that is just way down the list."

Still, there is probably no reason to think the awards lists will shrink soon. Angus MacKenzie, who has been editor in chief at Motor Trend for two years, has worked on auto magazines on three continents as editor of Car Magazine in England and at Wheels Magazine in his native Australia.

"At Wheels, we had the second oldest car award, next to Motor Trend," he said. "For magazines like ours, it is part of our brand and character to rate the subject of what we cover. What the companies do with them — well, we hope that they are honored — but that is not the point."

"It is the thing the wider customer relates to," he said. "The auto buffs buy our magazine all the time. The Car of the Year, that is where we resonate with the broader community."