



An outsider's look at the auto industry

No one has ever accused me of being elegant. Nor of having discerning taste. Acquaintances kindly look the other way when I make a particularly poor fashion judgment.

It should surprise no one that my choice of transportation is slightly off kilter. I drive a convertible every day of the year, from the sunny days of August straight through the blizzards of January. Not every consumer is enamored of the uniformity that rules today's highways. Some of us have nearly been left in the dust by the auto industry's race toward comfort, efficiency, uniformity and computerization.

We don't all want a modern SUV, basically a compact station wagon that looks like a jellybean. Sales trends show that many Americans do. But some of us desire unpopular traits in our daily transportation.

There's actually much to be said for the modern SUV. They're loaded with safety features like airbags and automatic braking. They offer plush comfortable seats, thick soundproofing, electric windows and seats, terrific sound systems, amazing dashboards and a high-gloss shine. They cruise the Interstate highway at 70 miles an hour without complaint. They look great in the driveway. And their fuel consumption, while not amazing, is alright — at least as long as gasoline prices remain low. Today's SUV seems to be an ideal car for millennials, families and retired folks. It's a do-all vehicle.

The only real competition to the SUV in today's wheeled transportation market is the pickup truck. It is the luxury vehicle of the middle class. Some pickups can carry six people in amazing comfort and silence, high above the pavement, in all weather. Today's pickup truck is about as luxurious as the average Cadillac or Lincoln of 40 years ago. It has little in common with the relatively petite 1960s Ford F-100 or Chevrolet C-1404, utilitarian vehicles that were used by farmers, delivery companies and other businesses.

Some of us (I assume I'm not completely alone in this regard) aren't all that attracted to such luxury. Some of us recall an earlier, simpler time, when cars were cars and trucks were trucks.

My childhood involved an eclectic variety of transportation provided by my parents, from giant 9-passenger station wagons manufactured in Detroit to tiny two-seat roadsters assembled in Italy. The first car I bought was a lowly Volkswagen Squareback with a warped steering wheel and, thanks to a generous helping of rust, no heater or defroster. Compared to that, my current soft top Jeep with side curtains feels like a sauna in a snowstorm. Sure, some chilly air sneaks in around the edges where canvas meets metal, but the heater blows like a propane furnace. The little gaps merely provide a welcome bit of fresh air to remind me that I live in the beautiful four-season north.

I've driven my current convertible through six Traverse City winters and six Traverse City summers. The decade-old vehicle offers many charms. The top stays down (and the doors off) much of the summer. Four wheel drive ensures I get

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the BIZ



Inside: Oldest store in Commons rebranded as Sanctuary

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ENTREPRENEURS

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"They see how we're a small-town operation, and that appeals to them. We're a niche business, a small business."

Penny Challender, vice president and treasurer



Record-Eagle/Dan Nielsen

Co-owners Holly Miller, left, and Penny Challender stand above the work floor at Hayes Manufacturing in Fife Lake.

FIFE LAKE COMPANY DRIVES FORWARD

Hayes Manufacturing employs 38 people

By DAN NIELSEN
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FIFE LAKE — Mechanical couplings made at Hayes Manufacturing Inc. in Fife Lake are spinning across the globe inside off-road machinery with nameplates including John Deere, Husqvarna, Toro, Manitou, Case and New Holland.

The family-owned company makes power transmission products — stub shafts, flywheel couplings and drive couplings.

"We're a small business doing things like a big business," said Holly Miller, company president.

She and family members Marie McDougall, vice president of operations, and Penny Challender, vice president and treasurer, own the company along with Sam Runkel, vice president of manufac-

turing and Mike Lawson, vice president of engineering and sales.

Miller, McDougall and Challender's grandparents started the company in 1966 as Rayclay Engineering in a garage in Rochester, Michigan. The company changed its name and moved to Manton in 1973, then to Fife Lake in 1990. Growth has been rapid despite the fact that Hayes competes against three much larger manufacturers of similar products.

The company capitalizes on its relatively small size by making the most of its ability to handle both small and large jobs, from one-off parts to quantities of 10,000. The management crew strives to offer a solid product and flexible customer service at a reasonable price. They constantly look for ways to make the business better.

"Going out of our way to improve," Chal-

lender said, is a basic rule at Hayes.

Potential customers who visit the 33,000-square-foot company facility in Fife Lake are greeted by an elegant lobby, an immaculate front office and a back shop that is massive, precisely organized and exceptionally neat.

"They see how we're a small-town operation, and that appeals to them," Challender said. "We're a niche business, a small business."

Hayes power couplers have been used in all kinds of devices. They're in Zamboni ice groomers, ship bow thrusters, Smuckers factories and Legoland. They help or have helped drive the mechanisms inside the Jungle Book ride at Disneyland, the Tower of Terror and the Jaws ride. Another was used to move the

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TECHNOLOGY

Workshop focus: Digital presence

SCORE series includes nine more monthly sessions

BY DAN NIELSEN
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TRAVERSE CITY — Entrepreneurs who run small businesses and managers who guide big businesses both know that a website is essential in today's world. The local SCORE organization wants to help small business owners get the most out of their websites.

SCORE last week launched a 10-part "Lunchtime Digital IQ Series." Each monthly event through October will explore a different specific subject, ranging from blogging to social media to traffic analysis.

"We felt there was a real demand for this," said SCORE representative Barbara Shellman.

SCORE traditionally has presented evening workshops, but chose a noon meeting time for

this series to reach a different audience. SCORE has 45 local mentors and serves more than 600 clients a year. Mentors provide free counseling to people starting or expanding a business. More information on the series is available at www.upnorthscore.com.

More than two dozen people gathered in the McGuire Room of the Traverse Area District Library to hear John Petrovich, co-founder and account manager of New Era Social Marketing, present last week's introductory session, "An Effective Website: The Place to Start."

A website, said Petrovich, provides a method of communication that can reach many. It's important to grab attention and gain trust if a sale is to be made. Collecting contact information is a good practice, he said, but sending email or other communications — except for specifically requested reasons — is a bad idea.

"You're going to lose the opportunity to interact with the cus-



Record-Eagle/Dan Nielsen

John Petrovich of New Era Social Marketing speaks during a SCORE workshop on effective websites.

tomers because you did something they didn't ask for," he said.

Popup ads can serve a purpose, he said, but placing them on a website's home page generally is a bad idea because they can repel visitors before they've had a chance to get interested in your product or service. Popups work better when visitors have traveled deeper inside a website.

"A pop-up can be more effective when you already have them engaged," said Petrovich.

Engagement — keeping a visitor interested enough to read and learn more — can hinge on good website design. And business websites need to look good on a wide variety of devices and screen sizes. Many people use a smartphone for much of their web browsing.

"Having a smooth mobile experience is critical," Petrovich said. "Mobile is growing — in some cases has overtaken desktop traffic."