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From the Los Angeles Times

AUTOS

Saturn ad blitz set for L.A.'s outdoors

The automaker will tout its hybrid Vue sport utility vehicle and Aura sedan on buses, at gas stations and elsewhere.

By Alana Semuels

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It's an old maxim in the ad business that promotional messages outside the home succeed because they're harder to ignore.

General Motors Corp. is putting the theory to the test in Los Angeles with what it describes as a "total landscape domination" campaign for the Saturn Vue and Aura, two new hybrids.

The campaign, which begins today, increases the number of Saturn billboards in town sevenfold and promotes the gasoline-electric vehicles on 400 buses and in 329 gas stations.

And on 500,000 insulating coffee-cup sleeves.

"We call it disruptive marketing," said Randy Parker, regional sales and marketing manager for Saturn. Disruptive in a positive way, of course. For GM, the upside potential is big. Japanese brands will account for nearly 50% of new cars bought in California this year, according to the California Motor Car Dealers Assn., and American-made vehicles just 37%. Nationally it's been the opposite this year, according to Autodata Corp., with new cars made in the U.S. accounting for about 50% of sales and those from Japan, 37%.

"California is a tough state for American carmakers," said Drew Neisser, chief executive at Renegade Marketing Group, a branding and consulting company. "There's an entrenched belief that the Japanese are making more reliable cars, and that Europeans make better luxury cars."

Detroit is also playing catch-up in the relatively new field of hybrids, where the Toyota Prius is the No. 1 seller.

So the Saturn campaign aims to overwhelm Angelenos with two made-in-America gas-electric alternatives: the Vue, a sport utility vehicle, and the Aura, a sedan.

The billboards declare that with a Vue or Aura you can drive to San Francisco on one tank of gas. Signs in planter boxes of grass placed atop pumps at the gas stations say, "We thought hybrids shouldn't be the only thing we do for the environment." As for the coffee sleeves, they show pictures of the cars and the words: "135 more safety features than this 205 degree cup of coffee."

GM officials wouldn't say how much it was spending on the L.A. campaign. But Parker explained why the company was pulling out the outdoor stops: "Trying to reach the consumer through traditional methods of advertising just doesn't work anymore."

That isn't the case just for automakers. People have figured out how to avoid promotional spots on television and have trained themselves to ignore those on the radio, and fewer people are reading newspapers and the ads in them. So outdoor -- also called out-of-home -- advertising is the second-fastest growing form in the business, behind the Internet. Spending in 2006 on outdoor advertising was \$6.8 billion, up 8% from the year before and a 31% hike from 2001.

The hope is that putting ads in places where people are thinking about driving will make Saturn "more

real to the consumer," said Mike Sheldon, president of Deutsch/LA, the ad agency behind the campaign.

Targeted out-of-home marketing is increasingly popular, with flat-screen technology making it possible to advertise nearly anywhere, including on bathroom stall doors and elevator walls.

"It's about the ability to place a compelling message in front of the consumer at the right moment when they're in the right mind-set to make a particular purchase," said Stephen Freitas, chief marketing officer of the Outdoor Advertising Assn. of America.

An association study found that for a Starbucks campaign, consumers remembered the outdoor ads more than they did those in print or on the radio, and the outdoor campaign cost less. But Don Bruzzone, president of the research company that conducted the study, cautioned that out-of-home campaigns might not work if the point an advertiser is trying to get across is complicated -- a person driving by a billboard at 55 mph doesn't have a lot of time to get the message.

One thing's for sure: Blanketing a city with ads risks irritating people such as Kevin Fry, president of the anti-billboard group Scenic America.

Scenic America's concern is about the commercialization of public spaces, which Fry said have "been almost completely surrendered to outdoor advertising and marketing of all kinds."

He doesn't like it, but he understands.

"People are turning advertising off, so what's a marketer to do?" he said. "They literally have to chase you down in the street."

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