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Ernest Dichter’s Studies on Automobile Marketing

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6.1 Introduction

Dichter’s reception by the general public in the United States and in Europe was mainly determined by his analyses of a few product areas which provided material for some rather popular myths that are known also to people who do not have much knowledge about Dichter’s specific work in market research and consumer psychology. These myths of course include the *topos* of the convertible car being a man’s ‘mistress’ and the sedan car being his wife, which Dichter first developed in January 1940 for Chrysler and their Plymouth brand (Dichter 1960a: 289–297). Based on Dichter’s advice to bring the dream of a ‘mistress’ a little bit closer to a man who still ends up ‘marrying his wife’ by buying the sedan, the Chrysler corporation developed the hardtop car (Packard 1957: 77–78; Twitchell 1997: 111–113). The remarkable career of Dichter’s gendered mistress–wife metaphor and the fact that it has remained a part of Western cultural memory for so long indicate that in some way his ideas reflect a distinct set of cultural beliefs. They also show that cars as objects of consumption are a unique area of symbolic production in the wider field of consumer interaction with objects and marketing messages (Holbrook 2006; Karmasin 2007; Martineau 1958; Wilson 2002). A large number of market analyses carried out today show that more than ever the symbolic and communicative ‘meaning’ of cars can be used to sell them and that their market value actually depends on that meaning to a large extent. The success of off-road vehicles (SUVs) is just one example that shows how the image of manliness, family protection and outdoor lifestyles can justify car-makers’ pricing strategy. Few marketers would agree that the price of an average SUV was based
on its material production costs or its actual use value in consumers’ daily lives.

Ernest Dichter never bothered to develop a coherent and – crucially – testable model of consumer motivations. But his eclecticism was in great demand among American and European car-makers between the 1950s and the 1980s, like Chrysler, Ford, General Motors (Pontiac, Chevrolet) and Nash in the United States, and Citroën and Renault in France (see Pouillard in this book), and Saab, Volvo, Vauxhall, the British Motor Corporation, Ford, Volkswagen, and Mercedes Benz in Great Britain and Germany. He studied the sales opportunities and psychological barriers to certain American car brands in Canada, Australia and virtually all parts of non-Communist Europe. At the Dichter Archive at Vienna University (Austria), there are around two hundred studies by the Dichter Institute for various car-makers, but also for makers of tyres and other spar parts producers that make up the global automobile industry. In his handbooks on Motivation Research, Dichter devoted large sections to the analysis of the various motives that drive consumers to accept or reject a car (Dichter 1960a: 33–36; 1964: 262–285).

Moreover, Dichter developed research projects around cars as highly symbolic and laden consumer objects. Like other market researchers, he realised that modern lifestyle changes of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, like the gradual disappearance of the ‘nuclear family’, growing urbanisation, the increased demand on employees to commute longer distances to and from work and the rising environmental and economic concerns of government planners about private mobility and petrol consumption, could be studied by engaging with people’s uses of cars (Dichter 1966, 1971). He also used the car as a symbol and object of symbolic material practices when he asked in 1967 whether we live our life as a ‘series of cars’ (Dichter 1967b).

An analysis of the available archival material helps correct a number of public myths about Ernest Dichter. All car-related studies were carried out with high precision and care and were based on a number of well-founded hypotheses and techniques. They were anything but a stroke of genius of a ‘depth psychology nerd’. The fact that the automobile industry was dominated by engineers with a practical knowledge about statistical techniques might have spurred Dichter on to pay greater attention to the validity of the data he produced. In addition, the automobile industry contributed a major share of his annual research income so he would have been wise not to offend any of his clients with shoddy market research. All of Dichter’s findings and analyses were