

Perspective

Dude, Where's My Car?

By Robert Klara A disquisition into one of advertising's most mysterious (yet effective) tactics: showing a cool guy with a cool set of wheels.

A pop quiz: What do recent ads for Ralph Lauren, John John Denim, Smartwater, Givenchy's Play Sport cologne and Tommy Bahama all have in common? Sure, they all employ a veritable platoon of handsome men to wear or pose with their products. But what else?

The answer: cars. In magazine ads over the past few months, all of these brands have not only paid for the model (or celebrity) to look keen with the merchandise but have also supercharged that keenness with the added prop of a sporty, expensive automobile. For the record, Ralph Lauren's current Purple Label ads show a svelte model standing alongside a Bugatti Type 57 two-seater, John John hired the perennially youthful Zac Efron to play around with a 1965 Mustang Fastback, British heartthrob Idris Elba is currently toting a bottle of Smartwater as he departs from his unidentified Italian speed machine, and Play Sport cologne features Justin Timberlake at the wheel of a Jaguar E-Type—the same model of car, as it turns out, that our friend in the Tommy Bahama threads is chilling with on the opposite page. Taken together, these examples spotlight a seldom-discussed but time-proven bit of wisdom when it comes to marketing to guys: If you want to create a successful ad, hiring a good-looking dude is always a good idea—but pairing said good-looking dude with a hot car...well, that's a great idea.

It's not a new one, either. As the 1954 Cola-Cola ad on this page proves, brands have been doing the guy/car combo thing for quite a while now. Whether you're selling a necktie or a bottle of soda, irrespective of market, price range or age group, the pairing seems to work. But why? Paris-based journalist Mark Tungate, author of the book *Branded Male* (Kogan Page, 2008), says it's a combination of how most males in the West are raised and the cultural images they're simultaneously exposed to.

"Men have had it drummed into them from an early age that possessing a car is a sign of success, that having a car is a cool thing," Tungate said. In addition, he noted, "Men are brought up to enjoy working with machines, and that resonates very deeply with guys. Brands know all this, and they know that it works. So I can see why they'd use the guy-car imagery. It's just part of our masculine identity."

Tungate adds that the psychology behind these ads is one of simple daytime fantasy. Most guys want to believe they're attractive and successful, and so showing an attractive male with the consummate symbol of achievement positions the brand in question as a desirable accoutrement that completes the mental bridge between who the consumer is and who he wants to be. What's especially interesting is how brands often use this heady symbology to sell comparatively average products—in these examples, a bottle of Coke or a short-sleeved camp shirt.

But Tungate explains that what's really being sold here aren't specific brands, but a feeling of accomplishment that brands then latch onto. In the Coke ad, the blond lad is posing proudly with his shined-up jalopy. "This is obviously his first car, and he's at the gas station taking a break—so already you've got this symbol of achievement," Tungate said. That symbol's been taken up quite a few notches in the Tommy Bahama ad (Jaguars ain't cheap), but the emotional mechanism in the ad hums along just the same. Indeed, Tungate said, both ads here—and any ad featuring a guy and a car—could carry the same caption: This could be you.



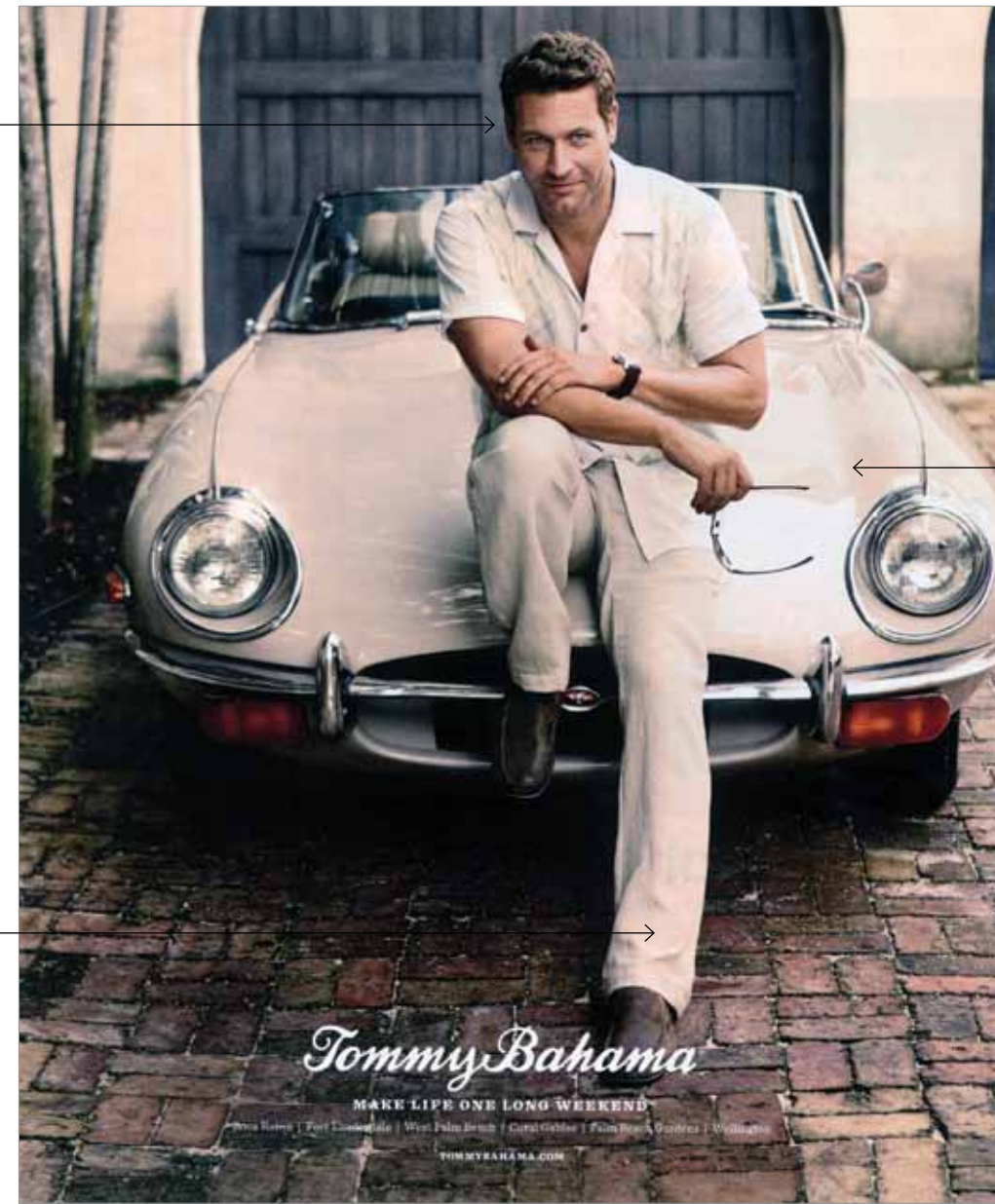
The slogan "Drive Safely, Drive Refreshed" was likely aimed at teen drag racing, a widespread social ill during the 1950s. Our teen here has a swell set of wheels, but he's also a straight arrow, "a clean-cut boy with loafers on," Tungate said. "Obviously, this ad is about achieving success and being at ease with yourself—and that's the message that Coca-Cola likes to put across."

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Mark Tungate, journalist and author of *Branded Male*

Tungate notes that it's common for brands to make the male model slightly older than the brand's target demo so the viewer will think, "Here's what I'll be like in a few years." While he saves his pennies for the Jag, he can buy the clothes today.

Chinos already have an inimitable way of saying casual and affluent at the same time. And if a fella can afford this \$118 Tommy Bahama pair, who knows? Maybe a Jag and a country house might be down the road after all.



This is a 1971 Jaguar E-Type roadster in Old English White. The same car recently appeared in the *Hemmings Motor News* classifieds for \$55,000. Mind you, the ad is portraying this as a weekend car. Yep, that's what marketers mean when they say "aspirational."