
Best Practice

Tony Watson

is managing partner at Lowe Live, a full-service relationship marketing agency that utilises traditional and digital communication channels.

'Saab vs. Letting Go': The 24-hour test drive campaign

Tony Watson

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Abstract

In 2001 Saab of Great Britain was the winner of the Gold Award in the IDM/Experian Business Performance awards scheme. This paper is derived from the submission by Saab and its agency, Lowe Live, to the awards panel.

1999 was a difficult year for premium car manufacturers. Market conditions heralded a significantly more adverse business climate than had been enjoyed previously and sales were declining. Newspapers were full of stories about 'Rip-off Britain', the Internet gave consumers easy access to cheaper car prices in Europe and the British pound was enjoying renewed strength, pushing car prices high above those in other European markets.

Added to these factors, which struck the entire British car market, the premium sector was in decline. Trends were pushing consumers away from executive cars towards new small MPVs and 4×4s.

Saab's competitors were responding to this trend by launching new models into broader sectors of the market, such as the Audi TT and Mercedes A Class. As well as offering these marques the opportunity to extend their franchise into highly profitable sectors of the market, it also gave them a much-needed opportunity to update the public perception about what they stand for. For Mercedes, the launch of the small, affordable A Class gave the brand a new accessibility and modernity; the TT enabled Audi to reclaim its design heritage and reassert itself as an avant-garde car marque. Even within the premium segment, marques were using new launches as a means of reinvigorating flagging sales. BMW launched their highly successful new 3 Series, Jaguar launched the S-Type and Lexus came in with the IS2000.

The Saab situation

By comparison, Saab's model range, as a niche player, was confined to the 'Premium 5' segment (Mercedes C and E Class, BMW 3 and 5 Series, Audi A4 and A6, Volvo and Saab). Unlike Audi, Mercedes and BMW, Saab had no success stories in other sectors of the market to counterbalance their losses in the executive-class segment. In spite of great sales of the BMW 3 Series, the Premium 5 group as a whole was in decline.

As a premium marque, Saab was beset with a particular problem in 1999. Consumers were simply not aware of the brand, and consequently

Tony Watson
Lowe Live
Bowater House
68-114 Knightsbridge
London SW1X 7LT, UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7589 0800
Fax: +44 (0)20 7584 0826
E-mail:
tony.watson@lowelive.com

Building awareness

were even less likely to consider the Saab marque when choosing a premium car. Brand tracking showed that, at the start of 1999, Saab had the lowest awareness and consideration scores of any of the P5 marques. Given the vast marketing budgets of its competitors, overcoming this was quite a challenge.

Consequently, the marketing activity deployed at the time was focused on raising awareness of the Saab brand and drawing people towards consideration of the marque. Budgets were not sufficient to create enough presence on television, so brand-building direct marketing alongside press and outdoor advertising were chosen as the most appropriate means by which to achieve this objective.

The direct marketing programme took the shape of '1: Saab', whose principal objective was prospect generation. It was designed to immerse the prospect in the Saab brand, thus creating greater awareness of the brand and its products, and so putting Saab on to that person's consideration list when they began shopping for a new car. Award-winning creative executions conveyed the brand essence of design and unconventionality in a compelling and moving way, introducing the prospect to the spirit of Saab.

Although the 1: Saab communications all contained a call to action, in the form of a test drive or literature request, this was by no means the focal point of the communication. These communications were all about the brand. Saab needed to educate their prospects about Saab, installing the brand within their personal repertoire, before they could even begin to sell them a car.

By the end of 1999, brand tracking showed that awareness levels had risen by 5 per cent to 29 per cent and consideration had reached its highest point in two years. However, sales of Saab cars in the UK were falling. Only 17 per cent of responses were test drive leads, and within the context of a declining market it became imperative that Saab's marketing investment generate a high percentage of sales leads.

The objective for 2000

Consequently, the marketing objectives for 2000 focused decisively on generating test drive leads. Lowe Live was tasked with consolidating the activity to date and generating growth through conquest of competitor drivers. In order to achieve this growth, it became critical that the agency accelerated prospects through the traditional 'purchase funnel' (awareness/consideration/trial/purchase), taking people from the awareness stage straight through to trial. In short, the agency had to get bums on Saab seats.

Specifically, Saab's objectives for 2000 were:

- 15,000 test drive leads (up from 3,469 in 1999)
- 66 per cent of which to be generated by direct marketing activity at no more than £50 per lead (down from £65 in 1999)
- maintenance (at least) or growth of Saab's share (9.9 per cent in 1999) of the declining premium car market.

The 24-hour test drive

Strategic direction for 2000

The year 2000 was a new departure for Saab. Until then, it had been the small fish in the big premium pond. Dwarfed by the massive marketing expenditure of its competitors, it was critical that, whatever Saab did, it created impact and differentiation in a crowded and declining market.

The 24-hour test drive strategy was one which fulfilled all the objectives. Saab was the first premium car manufacturer to offer such a thing, thereby generating interest and cut-through. It was also an ideal means of combining an awareness-building brand message with a decisive call to action that would generate sales leads to the dealers.

Furthermore, strategically it made perfect sense. Saab enjoys a very high conversion ratio of test drives to sales of 4:1, so the critical stage in the purchase process is getting a prospect into the car. Beyond that point, the car will do a lot of the selling itself.

As a business, Saab decided to put everything behind this initiative. This was no longer just about direct marketing: the 24-hour test drive was to be the foundation underpinning all of the 2000 marketing activity.

Every piece of communication would contain the call to action, ranging from brand posters to banners on the Internet. This was an entirely cohesive and holistic strategy with the very specific objective of protecting, or increasing, Saab's market share in the UK.

The objective for the 24-hour test drive campaign was to achieve cut-through in a crowded market with a compelling proposition and an arresting execution. Given the amount of focus being placed on the 24-hour test drive, the first creative challenge was to create an umbrella creative concept under which the year's activity could sit.

The key insight that led to the creation of Saab vs. Letting Go was Saab's extraordinary test drive to sales conversion rates: one in every four test drives results in a sale, demonstrating just how powerful an experience the test drive can be.

Following the thought that 'after 24 hours, you won't want to give it back', this concept centres on a woman's eye with the Saab car forming a teardrop being shed quietly. Firmly in line with Saab's brand values, it conveyed the message with single-minded simplicity. The visual purity and strength of the piece recall the importance of Saab's design heritage, and the brand's unconventionality is striking given that no other premium marque would have a communication about a test drive that was not all pictures of metal and talk of torque. In essence, this concept gave Saab a very powerful piece of brand-building direct marketing, which successfully bridged the gap between response generation and building an awareness of what the Saab brand stands for.

The 24-hour test drive campaign

As discussed, the objective for 2000 was to consolidate and grow Saab sales through conquest. In order to do this, it was vital that ways be found to get around the distinct shortage of data in the market. All premium car manufacturers use direct marketing as a means of targeting drivers of competitor models, and as such the data sources become exhausted very quickly and perform increasingly poorly over time.

The creative concept — Saab vs. Letting Go

Data strategy

The profile of the Saab driver is clearly defined. Intelligent, free-thinking, educated individuals, predominantly male, aged between 30 and 55. While affluent, they reject overt symbols of wealth and status and have an inclination towards design and the avant-garde.

In order to maximise the efficiency of all cold direct marketing activity, it was vital to go beyond the tried-and-tested routes of targeting premium and aspirer (eg Ford Mondeo, Vauxhall Vectra, Volkswagen Passat) drivers. The objective was to find ways of identifying very tightly honed targets that not only matched the attitudinal profile of existing drivers, but also had the financial capacity to buy a Saab and were at the correct stage in the purchase process to be thinking about buying a new car. Profiles of Saab drivers were used by Claritas and Experian to build models enabling the agency to refine its targeting of lifestyle data.

Affinity data were also used to give added volume, exploiting the rich diversity of interest- and hobby-related data sources available that match the Saab target audience.

Warm data gathered during the 1: Saab activity of 1999 were a prime source of data in 2000, offering the potential to take prospects who had already expressed an interest in the brand through to the next stage.

This data strategy allowed for a highly targeted and efficient direct mail campaign to be executed across the year, which was complemented with online activity, postcards, cinema advertising, responsive press and outdoor executions of the brand campaign.

Communication plan

The communication plan for the year was based on the deployment of three key strands of activity in each quarter; Letting Go, product support and promotional support (Table 1). Campaigns were set against a backdrop of press and outdoor activity, with each quarter's plan focused around the 24-hour test drive and supported across all media.

The Letting Go concept was the cornerstone of the test drive generation activity for 2000.

Saab vs. Letting Go

The Letting Go mail piece was the first element of the campaign, to be mailed in Q1 to cold and warm prospects. A bespoke microsite was built on the Saab website where the prospect could both interact with the brand and complete an online form requesting a test drive.

The communication contained a unique URL to the microsite, or it could be accessed via a hotlink on the website itself. Coupon and telephone response were also offered in the mailing. The mail piece was also used as a one-piece loose insert in lifestyle magazine titles.

Table 1: Saab's communication plan 2000

	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4
Letting Go	DM Insert Online	DM Online	DM Online Cinema	Cinema Online
Product	Diesel DM Online	Convertible DM Postcards	Convertible postcards Diesel DM Online	9-5 DM
Promotional	Victorinox DM Online	Classic FM	Classic FM DM Online	Winter DM Online

The teardrop concept was subsequently translated into banners for the Web, which were served on lifestyle sites and search engines, drawing responders to the microsite. The Letting Go cinema advertisement was created to support Saab's sponsorship of over 250 independent art-house cinemas. The 30-second ad was shown at the start of the trailers and a 14-second ident was shown just before the performance, using leading-edge technology to morph the woman's tear into a Saab. Once again, the subtle strength seen in the direct mail piece was executed to perfection for a medium that is characterised by loud, colourful films, creating a cinema ad that is extremely powerful through its serenity, beauty and haunting music reminiscent of the film *American Beauty*.

Product support

Running alongside the test-drive-focused Letting Go campaign were a number of product-focused communications. Utilising direct mail, online and postcards, warm prospects who had expressed an interest in a particular model and cold prospects from profiled lifestyle lists were targeted with one of three communications through the year.

The diesel campaign was mailed in Q1 and Q3 to consumer and fleet audiences respectively. Challenging the perception that a diesel is 'a noisy, smoke-belching monstrosity with the personality of a boulder and the performance of a tractor', it illustrates the fact that the Saab 9-3 diesel is quite the opposite, with impressive performance, speed and driveability. Inviting the prospect to take a 24-hour test drive in 'our smoke-belching tractor', it also makes use of the outdoor poster and press execution, Saab vs. Prejudice, giving added visual and communication synergy.

The convertible campaign was mailed in Q2, extolling the virtues of the Saab 9-3 convertible as a convertible for all seasons. As the market-leading four-seat convertible, this is a product which virtually sells itself, but it is logical to push these cars at the time of year when the sun starts to shine. Yet again, the call to action was the invitation to take a 24-hour test drive, and the pack made use of the poster execution, Saab vs. The Elements.

Given that the convertible is the Saab with the youngest profile and the highest proportion of female drivers, the campaign was extended to postcards which are displayed for free in gyms and bars. Using arresting images of a man with a V-neck suntan and a girl with dramatically wind-swept hair, the postcards had a perforated response device on the back inviting the recipient to take a 24-hour test drive in a Saab 9-3 convertible. The postcards also contained the unique test drive URL and the telephone number to arrange a test drive.

The Saab 9-5 saloon was the subject of the direct mail piece, 'One Day', mailed in Q4. Leveraging the aspirational qualities of the 9-5, the piece gives a lyrical illustration of the experience of one day spent in a Saab 9-5 saloon, drawing the prospect towards the 24-hour test drive application, whether by phone, coupon or Web.

Promotional support

Saab had a number of key promotions running through 2000, operating on a national level with the support of the dealerships. These were delivered through a variety of communications, maximising the impact of the promotion. These communications were also an opportunity for the use of incentives to be tested in the generation of test drive leads.

The first promotion of the year was with Victorinox Swiss Army knives, where the prospect was offered a free Swiss Army knife as an incentive for taking a 24-hour test drive. Comparing the versatility of the Swiss Army knife to a Saab 9-3, the communication invited the prospect to 'discover the hidden wonders of a Saab' and be entered into a prize draw to win a weekend in Switzerland.

A major promotion running through the middle of 2000 was with Classic FM. As well as being supported in direct mail, online (both by Saab and Classic FM) and in the Classic FM magazine, Saab also sponsored the highly popular radio programme, Smooth Classics at 7. All media routes promoted the 24-hour test drive. Classical music was identified as being of key interest to Saab drivers, giving strength to the offer of free tickets to a classical music event for the first 1,000 people to take a 24-hour test drive. Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' was used to parallel Saab's four products, the 9-3, the convertible, the 9-5 saloon and 9-5 estate as part of the prize draw offer to win use of four Saabs over the course of a year.

The winter promotion, launched in October, centred around the theme of skiing, another favourite with Saab drivers. The creative executions leveraged the exhilarating experience of the 24-hour test drive, with an engaging image of a skier taking off, only to see when the pack opens up, or the banner reveals, that he is in fact skiing off the wing mirror of a Saab. This promotion offered a prize draw to win a skiing holiday in Telluride in the Rockies to all responders and a £200 voucher for a winter holiday to all takers of the 24-hour test drive. This promotion was heavily supported online, with the creation of a unique microsite featuring the same creative, and a full range of banners and e-mail campaigns driving prospects to the microsite. Editorial space on third-party skiing websites lent further support to the campaign and drove responders to the microsite.

Brand advertising

In addition to all direct response activity focusing on the 24-hour test drive, all brand advertising also carried the 24-hour test drive call to action, with the telephone number and test drive microsite URL.

Designed to harness and maximise the impact of a consumer's brand experience, the 24-hour test drive campaign was holistic in every sense. During the whole of 2000, any communication seen by a consumer from Saab, in any media, contained the 24-hour test drive call to action.

Dealer buy-in

The 24-hour test drive campaign galvanised the entire Saab marketing effort behind one objective. However, the people of key importance to the success of the initiative were not the marketing teams, but the dealers. With the single-minded focus of all marketing activity, the dealers were being fed vastly increased numbers of leads of prospects wanting 24-hour test drives. Part of the challenge to make this campaign a success was to ensure that the dealers felt comfortable with the process and had sufficient cars to cope with the demand.

As well as spending time with the dealers, explaining the basis for the 24-hour test drive initiative and how their role in the process was of critical importance, Saab also put a fleet of cars at the disposal of the dealers to cope with the increased demand. This fleet of cars is known as the BOSS fleet — bums on Saab seats.

This was testimony to the faith and energy Saab put behind this initiative — it extended far beyond the marketing department at Saab and the team at Lowe Live, it touched the whole organisation and surely contributed to the campaign's success.

Results

In relation to the overall objectives for 2000 and the specific targets, the 24-hour test drive programme succeeded in terms of volume, efficiency and effectiveness.

Across all media, the volume of test drive leads generated in 2000 was over five times that of 1999, and exceeded the 2000 target by 4,744 (32 per cent) (Table 2).

Direct mail

Looking specifically at direct mail, test drive responses increased by 416 per cent, from 0.6 per cent in 1999 to 3.1 per cent in 2000. As a result of more tightly honed targeting, direct mail achieved response rates as high as 4 per cent. Furthermore, a higher proportion of test drive leads being generated were high priority (intend to purchase within the next three months, as opposed to normal, where the intended repurchase date is more than three months away) (Table 3).

Internet

2000 was also the first year for Saab to place such emphasis on the Internet, as both a response channel and a media route in its own right. Across the year, Internet responses (from any source) accounted for 44 per cent of responses, making the Internet the most used response channel.

Furthermore, click-through rates on the Saab banners exceeded expectations and industry norms, achieving average rates of 0.9 per cent, when the industry average is between 0.3 per cent and 0.7 per cent. On the winter campaign in particular, where the highest level of Internet activity was undertaken, click-through rates to banners and e-mails reached 13 per cent, with 3 per cent going on to complete the online test drive request form.

Efficiency

The efficiency of the 24-hour test drive campaign was also a vital part of its success. While the volume of test drive leads increased dramatically, the

Table 2: Test drive leads (across all media)

	Volume	Index
1999	3,469	100
2000	19,744	569

Source: Saab Information Centre, 2000

Table 3: Type of test drive leads, 2000

	Volume	Index vs 1999
Normal	14,993	552
High priority	4,751	633

Source: Saab Information Centre, 2000

cost per response fell significantly. Across the campaign, average cost per response for direct mail fell by 41 per cent from the 1999 level to just £39, which was 22 per cent lower than the 2000 target cost per lead (£50).

These results demonstrate the extent to which the 24-hour test drive campaign across the year was a success for Saab, although the most powerful endorsement of the impact of the campaign is seen when these results are put into market context.

Market share

The Premium 5 market segment had been in decline since 1998, and 1999–2000 saw this segment lose another 4.63 per cent in volume terms. Saab’s sales volume decline was only 3 per cent, showing a stronger performance than the overall market sector (Figure 1).

Furthermore, when looking at market share within the Premium 5 segment, at a time when the sector was declining, Saab’s share of that market grew from 9.9 per cent to 10.05 per cent.

Conclusions

It is clear from the results illustrated that the Saab vs. Letting Go campaign was indeed a success, much of which can be attributed to the single-minded approach that connected both marketing communications and infrastructure to a simple proposition — the 24-hour test drive. This was a proposition which not only appealed to consumers, but also leveraged a core Saab attribute — namely the one in four conversion from test drive to purchase.

This truly holistic strategy achieved its objectives on every level, in that it generated:

- a large volume of test drive leads
- improved effectiveness, bringing in a higher proportion of high-priority test drives
- improved efficiency, significantly lowering the overall cost per response
- a growth in Saab’s market share, in spite of a declining market.

By integrating all communications — advertising, direct and digital

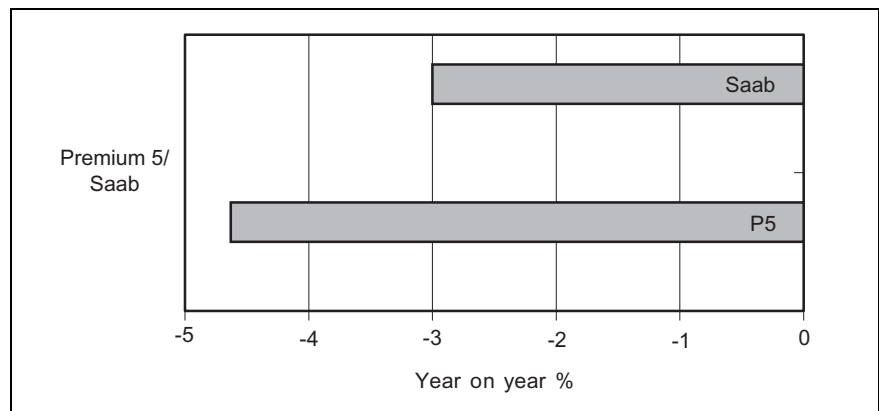


Figure 1: Premium 5 sector decline 1999–2000

marketing, product and promotional campaigns — behind this single proposition, Saab and its dealers pulled together to achieve an impressive set of outcomes in a difficult trading environment.

It was, indeed, a worthy winner of the IDM Business Performance Award 2001.