

BRAND APPEAL



THE NEW E-CLASS MERCEDES-BENZ IS ALL CLASS, SAYS TONY WATTS

BRAND image – that intangible appeal to our emotions that helps open the wallet against what might be considered rational objectivity – is a powerful force, one that companies spend billions of dollars to foster. And car companies are not immune.

Think about it: Volvos are safe; BMW builds driver's cars; Toyotas are indestructible; and solid engineering is at the core of the Mercedes-Benz brand.

In the car business there has to be an element of truth behind the image, or no amount of advertising will change it, but there are factors beyond the control of the companies themselves that also affect that image in a substantive way – primarily their customers.

When I think of Louis Vuitton, for instance, I picture some very slick advertising and some nicely-crafted product. That's brand image. When I see Louis Vuitton on a daily basis – the genuine stuff at least – it is generally on a pigeon-toed Japanese housewife in one of those silly sun visors. Not exactly Catherine Deneuve.

And then there are the cheap LV copies – generally worn by cheap-looking souls and plastered indiscriminately with logos like walking advertising hoardings. The advertising that inspires this look might indicate that ownership of a product projects an image of good taste, but one may argue that the good taste is the prerequisite before that image can be projected, and no amount of logos can fix that, in fact, quite the opposite.

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but I sincerely doubt Louis Vuitton is very happy about the situation, particularly as the image projected by the buyers seldom matches the image projected by the advertising.

And I have to say a decade ago in Singapore the success of Mercedes-Benz, particularly the E-Class, was also its Achilles heel; everybody wanted one, but one can't help wondering whether the image of a permed bloke with oversized jewellery and the obligatory gold Rolex might have turned some

customers away. This despite the fact that the company spent billions producing an excellent vehicle.

In some ways I suspect there was a backlash against the brand for that, plus, simply that junior didn't want to be seen driving the same car as dad, no matter how successful dad was. And that's not just a Singapore phenomenon – the average Mercedes buyer in Europe is apparently over 50, though that's no bad thing as there is a good chance that dad, at least, had the opportunity to earn an income. No point courting junior when he's unemployed and not in the luxury car market.

Mercedes-Benz has spent a lot of money to promote the sportiness of its offerings in recent years with its Formula One involvement for instance, but one gets the feeling there has been a shift back to its core values of rock-solid engineering. Certainly that's the feeling behind the wheel of the new E-Class.

This thing feels solid, and that's more than just the hefty 1,735kg kerb weight of the E300 test car. The silence in which passengers are transported is quite amazing, and that it seems to be as quiet in the cabin at 125km/h as it does at 25km/h speaks of some phenomenal engineering underneath. The way it gets around corners so well and provides a perfectly comfortable ride at the same time does likewise.

With the launch of the new E-Class Mercedes-Benz is offering two BlueEfficiency models, with turbocharged four cylinder engines, that boast a combined cycle fuel consumption of under eight litres per hundred kilometres. The test vehicle, with its 3.0-litre V6, uses just over nine litres, so is pretty impressive, too.

It is also impressive for its fit and finish, its new angular design and the huge array of standard and optional equipment. Radar-controlled cruise control, anyone?

Best of all, this E-Class feels as though it was designed and built to go forever, just like Benzes of old. And when it comes to brand image, delivering on your promise is just as important as making the promise in the first place. ■

The Mercedes-Benz E300 Avantgarde costs S\$220,888 inc COE from Cycle & Carriage, tel: +65 6298-1818.



WHAT'S NEW, PUSSYCAT?

TONY WATTS HAS A GRIN LIKE A CHESHIRE CAT AFTER DRIVING JAGUAR'S NEW XFR

“WHAT CAR WOULD YOU BUY?”

If I had a dollar for every time I had been asked that, I might well be able to afford a car – and one that might be the answer to the question, too.

Ironically enough, getting to drive all sorts of wonderful machines doesn't narrow that option, but rather widens it, as there are just so many good cars to choose from these days.

The question is clearly a hypothetical one, but I do have a rather tasty hypothetical garage. It contains a supercar that is used on weekends; and for the occasional track day, perhaps a dedicated race car; a four-seat convertible; a high-tech Japanese all-wheel-drive rally refugee; a selection of motorcycles (they're relatively cheap after all); a

stupidly powerful modified 1960s muscle car; a gorgeous historic vehicle (I'm undecided on this one: a Bugatti Type 35? Or perhaps a late 1930s Rolls-Royce Phantom III? Or an Aston Martin DB5? It's too hard to choose, so I'll have them all!); and for a daily drive? A fast saloon.

So with a rather eclectic selection of attention-grabbing vehicles in my imaginary garage, my choice when it comes to the vehicle people would see me in on a daily basis would be something a little less flamboyant, but with performance aplenty.

In this category there are some pretty sensational vehicles to choose from, the bulk of which are German, though there is an Italian in that selection, and now a Brit.

In a sense the Jaguar XFR is a car for all reasons – it is a comfortable luxury

saloon that cossets its passengers in a serene leather-clad cocoon. Put your foot down, though, and it becomes a missile, and thanks to its suspension technology, improved brakes, direct steering and large sticky tyres, it is more of an Exocet than a Scud.

The XFR builds on the best saloon Jaguar has released in years – the XF Jaguar came out with the XF last year, eschewing the retro design path the company had been travelling, instead proclaiming “this is what a modern Jaguar should be.”

And the XF is just that. It is sleek, handles well, and offers a passenger experience that makes it stand out from the crowd. If ever there was a vehicle that deserved the full-on European sports saloon treatment, this was it.

Under the bonnet of the new XFR resides a supercharged 5.0-litre V8 engine with 503bhp and an incredible 625Nm of torque. Floor it from a standstill and you’ll reach the metric ton in an astonishing 4.9 seconds. That would be impressive in a sports car, but the XFR does it without any fuss or histrionics. It does produce a basso V8 growl through the quad tailpipes, but not so loud that you’d qualify for the look-at-me Orchard Grand Prix weekend crowd in their fancy sports cars. And the real

beauty of the XFR is that it is not a car that begs to be driven hard all the time – doing so is fun for sure, but it also does gentle city cruising very well.

Despite a few tweaks, such as a boot lid lip and deeper front spoiler with enlarged air intakes, the exterior is refined and lacking in ostentation. Very British indeed. In fact, the front end addresses the complaint I had about the standard XF’s slightly anonymous face, while integrating nicely with the sleek exterior lines.

The interior retains the XF’s sense of theatre, with the gear selector knob rising out of the centre console and the air vents opening after the starter button has been thumbed; the controls are intuitively placed too. The XFR also get body-hugging sports seats, which are a welcome addition.

In Singapore terms the XFR isn’t exactly cheap, but then neither is my imaginary garage. If I were forced to choose just one car, and I had the budget, the XFR might well be it. ■

The Jaguar XFR costs S\$380,000 exc COE from Malayan Motors, tel: +65 6473-7755.