

June 11, 2009

Be careful what you say

I was going to write something about alternative energy today, but I found a new motivation after reading comments made by Japanese media that were reported in the June 8 issue of [Automotive News](#).

Apparently the Japanese public believes that the demise of both GM and Chrysler is proof that U.S. automakers can't compete with the likes of Toyota and Honda. It's time to gloat.

"The fall of a gigantic company that claimed 'What is good for GM is good for America' signifies the end of the American model that led manufacturing industry in the 20th century," the *Nihon Keizai* business publication said after GM's bankruptcy filing.

Former head of Honda of America Manufacturing, Shoichiro Irimajiri, was a little more direct with his comments in another Japanese publication: "Perhaps the ones who can fix it are not Fiat nor Magna, but Japanese managers and engineers."

Sorry. I get a little bit hot and bothered with smug people and their comments. I guess it goes back to always favoring the underdog.

There is no doubt that companies such as Toyota and Honda build very good products. But don't attribute their recent success solely to good manufacturing practices and inspired company leadership. Those companies have built their fortunes in the freest of free markets: the U.S. consumers took almost 50 years to embrace those brands. That's not the story in Europe, a fragmented collection of hard-to-crack markets. Visit Europe and you'll see the occasional Asian brand, hardly the slew of Toyota and Honda nameplates you see in North America.

Additionally, it ain't so easy being the big dog. As Toyota has grown, [quality in its products has slipped](#).

Maybe styling has suffered as well? C'mon, a lot of the Toyota and Honda brands look strikingly similar. Ask [Dustin Hoffman](#).

For the record, I own a 2003 Subaru Outback and a 2005 Chrysler Pacifica, both of which are all-wheel drive. Each offered styling and features that worked for my individual commuting needs and my family obligations.

Those automobiles are also sort of unique. Outbacks are station wagons, and people just aren't purchasing them in large numbers anymore. Pacificas were great alternatives to minivans at the time, giving you the seating and comfort without the big boxy look.

So that's the challenge for Japanese companies like Toyota and Honda. They can build solid cars when focused on the task, but can they inspire passion among U.S. drivers? Arguably, that's been the life preserver that's kept U.S. automakers afloat in the incredibly competitive global vehicle market.

Japanese companies will need to inspire that same sort of passion in driving enthusiasts in the U.S. if they want to be dominant in the North American market for years to come. All companies can learn to make quality automobiles; just look at Hyundai.

Now I feel a little bit better. To be honest, I still might be upset at [Japan's victory in the World Baseball Classic](#). At least Ichiro Suzuki didn't start talking smack about his team's dominance. Humility is a characteristic to be admired.