

INTERNET

Mercedes-Benz shows reverence for Nelson Mandela via short film

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By JOE MCCARTHY

German automaker Mercedes-Benz honored Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, with a video that illuminates how a team of South African factory workers crafted a vehicle for the international hero following his release from prison in 1990.

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The "Labour of Love" short film portrays a team of a Mercedes-Benz employees that worked for free to create Mr. Mandela's vehicle. Uncovering this resonant film colors in Mercedes-Benz's heritage and authentically aligns the brand with a profoundly influential figure.

"This type of activity can be risky, as some people could view it as a crass commercial effort to capitalize on the popularity and death of an influential world figure," said Ron Kurtz, president of the [American Affluence Research Center](#), Atlanta.

"Mercedes seems to have done this film tastefully and with very admirable motivations," he said.

"It will contribute to a positive reinforcement of the brand's stature, but it will not likely produce any new business or loyal fans of the brand."

Mr. Kurtz is not affiliated with Mercedes-Benz, but agreed to comment as an industry

expert.

Mercedes-Benz did not respond by press deadline.

Rebuilding a nation

The five-minute film begins with three workers at the Mercedes-Benz South Africa East London manufacturing plant explaining how the idea to deliver a car to Mr. Mandela dawned upon them. Footage from the project is interspersed with commentary.

News of Mr. Mandela's release from prison after 27 years had just begun to circulate.



Phillip Groom of Mercedes-Benz South Africa East London

Due to apartheid's widespread suppression of images and video of or text from Mr. Mandela, hardly anyone from South Africa knew what he looked like and how he carried himself. Mr. Mandela's legend was still large in the national conscious, but it was largely mysterious.

As the atmosphere in the country grew to a feverish excitement, floor workers at the factory proposed to construct a car to greet the national hero upon his release in June 1990.

Shop stewards who pitched the idea to management, came back dancing and singing with joy. In exchange for receiving the materials for the car, the workers offered to work one hour of overtime for free every day to build the car.

Once the green light was given, a plaque was made to let all workers know which car was for Mr. Mandela.



Video still

The project filled the plant with such dignity that workers danced and sang while carrying the frame to the next group of workers.



Video still

Ronald Fraser, a worker at the factory, explained how the project strengthened the relationship between the union and Mercedes-Benz.



Video still

The vehicle and its many parts came to symbolize the unifying of the country's many races and factions for the workers.



Mr. Mandela

Mr. Mandela apparently said that the car would always remind him of the blood spilled by the many South Africans for peace and freedom. The world icon also said in a speech played in the film that the car demonstrated that the country would be able to work together and make sacrifices to rebuild the nation.

Embedded Video: [//www.youtube.com/embed/ZLtYr3d0wvs](https://www.youtube.com/embed/ZLtYr3d0wvs)

Labor of Love

Aligning with greatness

Brands consistently bring their brand image in alignment with an influential figure. Generally, brands will look to people who played an important role in shaping the brand.

For instance, French automaker Bugatti unveiled the third model Nov. 5-9 in its “Les Legendes de Bugatti” series that honors former Bugatti race factory head Bartolomeo Costantini at the Dubai International Motor Show. The Meo Constantini model will be limited to three vehicles and is priced at \$2.82 million before taxes and and transport fees ([see story](#)).

Other times, figures outside of a brand's history are held in the spotlight.

For instance, Swiss watchmaker Breitling honored World War II veterans with a limited-edition watch collection that contributes a percentage of proceeds to the Honor Flight Network. The 56-piece wristwatch collection represents Breitling’s strong connection to aviation and the charity organization’s mission of arranging flights for veterans to visit the World War II Memorial in Washington free of charge ([see story](#)).

Mercedes-Benz's tribute to Nelson Mandela is peculiar because it combines brand history and an outside figure.

"This film will be a positive influence on the morale of the Mercedes employees, especially those in their South Africa factory," Mr. Kurtz said.

"It will also be of interest to people around the world who revere Nelson Mandela," he said.

Final Take

Joe McCarthy, editorial assistant on Luxury Daily, New York

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