

GENERAL MOTORS CORPORATION

INTER-ORGANIZATION LETTERS ONLY

DATE November 16, 1956

SUBJECT Four Passenger Sports Car

TO Mr. Harley J. Earl

ADDRESS

Attached is a memorandum pertaining to a four-passenger sports car. It was sent to us as a matter of interest by Mr. A. B. Clark of Campbell-Ewald Company. We feel it very clearly states why there should be such a car.

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Attach.

FOUR-SEATER ARGUMENT

To anyone thoroughly acquainted with the American sports car market (and its limitations) and certainly to anyone familiar with the psychological pattern of American dating habits, it is odd indeed that no manufacturer has chosen to offer a four-seater sports car.

There are reasons for this, of course, but in a large degree they can be ascribed to certain blindnesses on the part of the manufacturers, and misconceptions as to the true nature of the sports car, the sports car's appeal, and the sports car's market potential.

This can be demonstrated by the Corvette's unsuccessful struggle (until 1956) and the Thunderbird's failure to achieve its planned potential in the past year. Certainly these two examples reveal pitfalls to be avoided and do more than hint at correct paths to be followed, as will be seen later.

Most of the "dream" sports cars unveiled during the past few years have been two-seaters. Why? First, because it is easier to create a sporty-looking car around the two-seater configuration (and looks are the big item in a dream car). Second, "Because all the real sports cars are two-seaters."

Yes, all "the real sports cars" are two-seaters ----because they are European sports cars. But this doesn't take into account the fact that European ideas about sports cars (and women and racing competition and engine sizes and luggage space) are vastly different from ours.

The American is considerably more adolescent in his attitudes toward women and social relationships than the European. The European travels with his woman; theirs is a self-sufficient and adult relationship. The young American, still clinging to the childhood "gang" concept, prefers to double-date; he is accompanied, not only by his girl-friend, but also by his chum and the chum's girl.

The above argument may seem abstruse; it very definitely is not. In my own experience, backed by hundreds of personal interviews, the difference between the American and the European social attitudes is usually the main determining factor in queering a sale in the case of an American male who otherwise would be delighted with a sports car. Over and over again, young bachelors with the money and the requisite interest in sports cars have declared they could not bring themselves to buy a car with only two-passenger capacity. In addition, men who fell in love with an MG, say, and bought it without pausing to consider the social inconveniences, lost their appetite for a sports car in six months of driving.

To turn to another phase of the four-seater argument: It is unlikely that a low-volume item like the sports car can be produced in America to sell for much less than the present prices of the Corvette or Thunderbird. This, in turn, automatically limits the potential market; the young bachelor, fresh out of college, who might otherwise be interested in a two-seater sports car, normally is not yet earning enough money to afford such a vehicle.

So let's wait a few years until he has worked his way up to a higher income bracket. Alas, he now has acquired a wife and a child or two; he can't use a Corvette as a family car.

Now he must become a two-car owner before he can qualify for our two-seater sports car--- but does that solve the problem? Hardly. He can drive the Corvette to the office, using it as a commuter car. But the weekend fun of driving a sports car is sharply curtailed. Trips with the children require the use of the family sedan, not the Corvette. Party dates which require that he and his wife stop by to pick up the Robinsons automatically knock out the Corvette. Theater parties are usually double-dates. And the sports car sits in the garage, piling up black marks in the wife's book.

In plain fact, the four-seater should be natural, indigenous American sports car. What has prevented this?

First, as already recited, there is the designer's difficulty in producing a sporty-looking "dream car" on a four-seater chassis -- he wants the hood and deck line to look as long as possible in relation to the passenger space and the two-seater gives a better ratio.

Second, there is the manufacturer's misconception: the European sports cars that first captured the American imagination are two-seaters, therefore all sports cars are two-seaters.

Third, there is the element of road-racing competition: the two-seater has an automatic edge in power-to-weight ratio and therefore is likely to be more successful in battle.

In connection with this third point, it should be conceded that the element of success in road-racing is an important one in the sports car field. It will be recalled that the Corvette did not achieve its current degree of approbation among sports car people until it began to prove itself in competition -- at Sebring, Pebble Beach, Bakersfield, Elkhart Lake, and Palm Springs. Virtually every sports car that has been successful in sales has also been successful in racing.... Jaguar, Austin-Healey, MG, Mercedes-Benz, Triumph, Porsche, etc

Before we conclude that this is an unqualified argument for the two-seater, let us recall that there are two paths to success in racing (1) in modified classes, where the cars become virtually pure racing machines, unusable on the street. (2) in production classes, where the competitors are merely tuned versions of normal touring vehicles.

In the former case, the success of the racing car is calculated to reflect credit on the engineering skill of the manufacturer, encouraging the public to buy cars with the same nameplate but widely differing specifications. In the second case, the appeal is much more direct, since the identical cars are on sale and private owners are encouraged to buy and race them, further adding to the luster of the name.

In production class racing, a four-seater of proper specification can be expected to acquit itself handsomely, even in competition with touring two-seaters, though always operating under a slight theoretical handicap of weight and wheelbase.

In considering a possible four-seater Corvette, what are the elements to be weighed? Why should we build such a car at all, how many can we sell?

(1) Why build a sports car? Because a sports car offers the kind of continuing excitement the normal passenger car never can achieve -- an atmosphere of challenge, action, combat, adventure and color. Furthermore, there is the Thunderbird, which by the fact of its existence almost makes it necessary for the Corvette to continue if we are to avoid the embarrassment of confessing defeat. The sports car can contribute a luster and prestige to the whole line and garner valuable publicity as well, while building a pro-GM prejudice in the public mind.

(2) How many can we sell? Never very many by American standards. Never enough to be a real profit item. And, fortunately, never enough so the car will begin to be dull by sheer repetition. Never enough so we will have to make yearly changes in styling with concomittant cost. Around 10,000 annually would be enough, though 20,000 would not be too much.

Let's take a look at the kind of four-seater than would, in my opinion, best serve our purposes.

First, it should be a GENUINE sports car, not an ersatz imitation or a "dream car" type. By that I mean it should be a driver's car, with Impeccable road-holding, extreme rapidity and precision of control, very "quick" steering, superlative brakes, a very compact and extremely solid feeling.

Second, it should be a very durable car because what we are aiming for is owner loyalty that will enhance the reputation of the car over a period of years, to aid in building the word-of-mouth advertising that is our eventual target five years from now. The initial good impression should not be undercut by niggling service annoyances.

Third, it should be a masculine car. Women do not buy sports cars, certainly not genuine sports cars. Everything about the car should suggest ruggedness, potency, precision, function. It should say "machine" in every line, dial, control, and color. What I would like to see it do is capture the feeling (if not the actual contours) of the rear end of the La Salle II roadster of 1954.

Fourth, passenger accommodation: The two front seats should be outstandingly comfortable. Not comfortable in the overstuffed, plushy, thick-backed sense, but comfortable as only a well-designed, properly contoured bucket seat can be -- one that holds the driver securely, at the right angle and height from the floor, so he becomes part of the car. The two rear seats do not have to be so comfortable; all they are required to do is hold two passengers adequately for distances of 100 miles or less without actual discomfort and the legroom/headroom requirements can be adjusted to cope with this.

The luggage space, with four aboard, need not encompass more than two two-suiters, stowed vertically in the trunk. However, glove compartments and map-pockets should be intelligently arranged, and the rear seats should fold down to make additional luggage space when only two passengers are being carried.

Fifth, performance. This is perhaps the least of our problems. A slightly hotter-than-standard production engine will do. Coupled with relatively light weight, this will enable the car to dust off production sedans handsomely. Much more vital is the provision of a well-designed four-speed manual shift transmission with synchromesh on all four gears, plus sufficient shock absorber, spring and stabilizer bar options to put the car in road racing trim when competition is called for.

Sixth, styling. A four-seater of this type cannot compete successfully with two-seaters using the modern long, low ultra-streamlined type of styling. It is necessarily too high, with too long a roofline. So why not go against the grain and revert to the idiom of an earlier day, the 1930 Bentleys, TC-MGs, and so on? Let's revert to the slab stern and high luggage compartment, the nearly vertical rear window, the leather strap and "chunk of road machinery" feeling. There is a powerful sentimental appeal to reinforce us, as well as the masculine feeling for machinery that is visible. Besides, I think we would find an unexpected advantage in styling that is counter to the trend: we would be copying no one; it would always look individual and fresh; the visual impact of such a car on the street -- even five years old -- would remain sharp and clear. You could, in a sense, "style it and forget it" -- there would be no necessity for yearly revisions or major facelifts.

We would, in essence, be creating a "classic." And such a car would live longer in the minds of motorists than any "car-of-tomorrow" designs we can produce today.