

Professional Perspective



BERLIN SHOWROOM

A few years ago, I wrote about the “new” marketing plan that Saab and some other brand of cars were trying out. The plan was to build “showrooms” in upscale business districts of large cities where potential shoppers (those with means but maybe short on time to drive somewhere else) could walk in and peruse the offerings. As originally defined, they were to have child play areas and movie-type theaters to entertain the uninterested family members. The proposals I had read about said that these were to be Saab-owned and that the cars could not be purchased at these locations. The buyer would be referred to a dealer. Linda and I had seen other brands with this concept in various European cities but had not run across a Saab offering. Some brands had one-car showrooms and others had much more elaborate storefronts. We didn’t ever investigate those showrooms since we are only interested in Saabs.

When we planned our trip to Germany this summer, we included several days for sightseeing in Berlin. We usually enlist the help of our friends who are resident Berliners to help us locate places and things that we want to see. I was confident we could find one of the Saab showrooms if they still or ever did exist. Before leaving the states, I had e-mailed Saab of Germany asking questions about what had happened to the showroom project. I was directed to Saab City-Berlin. Since we know basically no German, I asked my friend, Jerry Kragt, to phone Saab City to see if

someone there would consent to an interview. You might think a call like this would not be necessary, but even with a referral by Ed Abbott of Abbott Racing and an appointment with a London Saab dealer a few years ago, we not only did NOT get an interview but were asked to leave and not take any pictures. So, I was anxious to receive a positive response from this phone call. I wasn’t disappointed.

The original concept for these showrooms in Germany has evolved into more than one example. The showrooms in Hamburg and Munich are showrooms only. No one can purchase a car in their stores, however, the Dresden and Berlin stores can sell the cars on the spot. The Saab City-Berlin facility is located at 100 Kurfurstendamm (considered to be part of the city center).

Quoting from Fodor’s “Exploring Germany,” “the famous Kurfurstendamm (Elector’s Causeway) dates to the 16th century and was used by Prussian Kings to reach their hunting lodges in Gruenwald. It became a favorite address for Berlin’s high society and was remodeled in 1871 by Bismarck.” In WWII virtually all its great houses were destroyed and its 2 ¼-mile length became a parade of bars and shops. The most striking landmark is the ruined Kaiser Wilhelm Gedachtniskirche (memorial church), bombed in 1943 but left as a reminder of the war.” If you have ever visited Berlin this church is a popular tourist attraction. After the war, the Kurfurstendamm was gradually rebuilt. Today it is a tree-lined, four-lane boulevard that has evolved into a luxurious, upscale shopping center with famous brand name shops and boutiques like Chanel, Cartier, etc. From the head of the street and stretching westward, you will find that the area is very touristy. The tall, black plate-glass slab, the Europa-Center skyscraper is nearby and surmounted by a whirling Mercedes logo. Among the very pricey shops, I noticed Mercedes



Chuck Andrews, Jerry Kragt and son Jason in front of Saab City Berlin. All photographs provided by the author.



Saab owner Gabriele Nothard, Jerry Kragt and Chuck Andrews at the main desk. The showroom had room for only three cars and displays in the wall behind the desk and cars.



and BMW showrooms between Saab City-Berlin and the street head where there was a VW showroom. As we drove westward a little bit, we saw another VW showroom. The Kurfurstendamm was a very busy, wide avenue so we could have missed several dealerships because they blend in so well with the other shops. This is prime real-estate! There were no empty storefronts and lots of shoppers were walking throughout the district. Most appeared to be locals. You can tell tourists from locals, right?

We arrived on a bright & sunny but extremely hot afternoon and were greeted by Sales adviser Gabriele Nothard. She understood some English but spoke very little. Luckily, I had brought Jerry and his son, Jason, to translate for me. Ms. Nothard greeted us warmly and offered chilled, bottled water while we talked. Although we interrupted her consultation with a customer in the showroom, she was congenial and introduced us to him. The gentleman had previously owned five Saabs so was well-versed in his knowledge, plus, he spoke English quite well. With Jerry's help, Gabriele did her best to answer my questions and was a wealth of information. She said she had been at Saab City-Berlin for 6 years and seemed to be the only person there. Somehow, I think Saab City must have a close relationship to Saab corporate because they are also listed as an Unlimited Partner.

Ms. Nothard sells the cars from the showroom and says it is still called a pilot project. The interior is designed in glass, plexiglass, chrome and wood trim, much like Saab dealerships in the U.S. (Corporate identity?) Although the showroom was very plain it was certainly attractive at the same time. There were three cars parked inside and one demonstrator outside on the sidewalk: a Biofuel 9-5, a diesel wagon and a gas-powered convertible. I asked about the Biofuel 9-5. She had not sold any because the fuel was not easily found. Otherwise, sales are good, she said. Only new cars were on display in the showroom. I was informed that service is available at the dealership's other locations. You know it's hard to ask questions and get answers through an interpreter but we did okay. While Ms. Nothard was explaining all the engine options (some that we don't have here in the states) when a shopper walked in. He looked at the cars for awhile and then left. Because parking is difficult to find on such a busy street, pedestrians are the rule. Obviously, the exhibit of cars is attracting people



Dissection view of a new 9-5 oil pump. Dial micrometer is used to measure the end play in the pump rotors. The maximum clearance is supposed to be .002". We now have four new pumps that measure beyond the maximum tolerance. The actual measurements for this pump are seen in the photograph.

to the store. This sales approach, while being very expensive, looks like it is working well. The biggest asset to Saab City – Berlin, may be Gabriele. She spent over 45 minutes with us and was personable, friendly, efficient and professional. The showroom approach was relaxed and welcoming. If we lived in Berlin and were car shopping, we would definitely visit Gabriele at Saab City-Berlin. I think this sales concept might work in some spots in the U.S. and who knows, maybe there already are some here.

Meanwhile, the surprises just keep coming. When we arrived home from Germany, we were confronted with three cars in our shop that have low oil pressure. The oil pressure

issues were found using our flow chart. It was discovered that all three of these cars needed new oil pumps. So, we installed new oil pumps, housings and covers (from Saab) in the cars but the oil pressure did not come up to the level we expected. There is considerable discussion about how oil pump clearance should be measured. We believe the only accurate measurement that can be taken is the end-play of the gears in the housing. Because Saab does not offer a tool to properly measure this, we took the oil pumps in question out of the cars and to a machine shop where they were measured with a dial-micrometer. We found that all three of the NEW oil pumps had too much clearance. In other words, they are apparently DEFECTIVE! So, we have been working backwards through the parts chain with Saab. We have also sent this information directly to who we think are responsible engineers at GM to see what is happening. In the interim, we are testing the pumps to try to determine how deficient they really are.

This involves putting the pump in a car that we know has good oil pressure to see if it improves what the old pump did or if it decreases the pressure. Obviously, this is a lot of work but someone has to do it! Our suggestion to any of you who may be contemplating a new oil pump installation is to have it measured first to make sure that it isn't defective. By the time a pump is installed there will have been hundreds of dollars invested in labor. Don't let it happen to you.

REMEMBER: Just because it's new doesn't mean it's always right.

For 31 years Chuck has owned and operated a sales, service, autobody and parts facility specializing in Saabs.