

Raising expectations. And more than meeting them.

By Joe Sage

“Brand is a substitute for knowledge.” This profound marketing observation explains a lot of buying decisions. It is perhaps somewhat cynical, but can explain the success of everything from cellphones to breakfast cereal. It is likely a big reason we consistently see certain makes of vehicle on the road, when there are so many good alternatives. One brand may benefit from some reputational perception earned during specific eras long past, while another may just not have built sufficient awareness. Nonetheless, there are clearly many big decisions made with the thinnest of reasoning. And a lot of people miss a lot that way.

Mitsubishi is a huge company, one of Japan’s keiretsu conglomerates, with operations in everything from consumer electronics to aerospace and defense. From liquid natural gas freighters to cruise ships. From wind turbines to orbital rockets.

In the US, there are three giant Japanese auto brands and several smaller ones. Mitsubishi’s sales are a small slice of our pie, but they are not alone in that, actually falling in

the same general volume range as Porsche, Fiat, Lincoln and others, and about three times those of Jaguar, or ten times those of Smart. None of these need an introduction.

Mitsubishi, though, seems to escape some people’s attention, but that has started to change. Market analyst IHS Automotive identifies Mitsubishi as one of five brands leading the industry in conquest/defection improvement—sales coming from other brands. This spells opportunity.

The \$12,995 Mitsubishi Mirage subcompact has topped industry lists ranking affordability, green attributes and customer loyalty, and its sales have roughly doubled year-over-year as of May, outselling seemingly better-known vehicles including such a wide range as the Scion xB or the Cadillac CTS.

Mitsubishi sales overall are up close to 40 percent, exceeded only by Jeep at 43 percent (and followed next by Lincoln at 27).

Looked at from the home office’s perspective, the US in just one year has moved from fifth place to second place in overseas sales for the brand and is currently on track to be its number one export market yet this year.

The single best-selling Mitsubishi model in the US is the Outlander Sport, a five-passenger compact utility that starts just under \$20,000 and delivers up to 32 MPG highway.

Its big brother is the seven-passenger Outlander—called a compact by some sources, midsize by others. Despite 40 percent more passenger capacity, the bigger Outlander still starts at just \$22,995 and is rated up to 31 MPG highway. (The Outlander and Outlander Sport actually share the same chassis and 105.1-inch wheelbase.)

Sales for the bigger Outlander at less than half the pace of the Sport seem to suggest potential for growth in the wake of the five-seater’s popularity, also spelling opportunity.

For 2016, the bigger Outlander is completely new inside and out. We flew to San Francisco—where Mitsubishi had just finished attending the Google I/O 2015 conference (with its own implications)—to find out more about what’s behind the brand’s rather sudden surge and to meet the new seven-seater.

The room goes dark and a screen comes to life. An Inuit tells us there are 37 words for snow in his native language, and the new 2016 Mitsubishi Outlander can de-ice them all. A plastic surgeon scrutinizes the sheet metal and tells us he hates to say it, but he wouldn’t change a thing. A ballerina illustrates the vehicle’s elegant suspension. A Ninja fighter

underscores its quiet ride. It’s all part of Mitsubishi’s brilliant “100 spokespeople” ad campaign for the new Outlander—a chance to explain the all-new seven-seat crossover’s 100 improvements and upgrades for 2016. It’s a clever way to hold audience interest from one ad to another, building an endlessly varied yet consistent message, all within a smaller manufacturer’s budget.

The main mission is to keep the brand’s individuality. “If we act the same as the competition, we’ll simply blend in,” says marketing director Francine Harsini. Mitsubishi has stood at about 57 percent—similar to Mazda—for brand awareness, but has tended to rank lower for purchase consideration in the past. The new campaign—Find Your Own Lane—will benefit not only from its clever theme, but from a budget that has been roughly doubled, with consistent presence planned “month in and month out,” according to Harsini.

We’ve spent time with both the Outlander and Outlander Sport over the past several years and have noted their subtle points of evolution, some in parallel, some not, inside and out.

The smaller Outlander Sport had taken on a more recognizable family face several years earlier, incorporating cues from the aggressive grille of the hot Lancer Evolution rally car, which also made their way into some versions of the seven-seat Outlander or Outlander GT, though we had found it easy to misinterpret which model was which, at times. You can see at a glance that the 2016 Outlander is new.

The seven-seat Outlander was given a facelift in 2014, a chance to distinguish itself. When we first saw it, at the Mudfest outdoor utility vehicle event in the Pacific Northwest, we instinctively gave its new look a “most improved” nod. But when we had it for a week back home in Arizona, we found people frequently asking what it was. Interest and intrigue are good, but baffling anonymity—not so much so. The rear was weak, too, with an aftermarket catalog feel to the lights and trim. A minor course correction in 2015 opened the grille area wider and squared things off a bit.

But for 2016 the Outlander receives all new sheet metal from the windshield forward and new (red) lenses and trim in the rear. There is style continuity from Outlander’s prior two years in the silver upper grille area, but more has been done to incorporate the styles of the top-selling Outlander Sport and the halo-generating Evo in the blacked-out lower grille—and the whole treatment is tied together with aggressive chrome bars that telegraph strength, echoing elements of the classic Montero. Put it all together, and Outlander is well positioned to capitalize on Outlander Sport’s popularity, but carrying its own distinctive character.

These are things that make that plastic surgeon nod approvingly. But these are just its styling cues. The biggest changes—there are over 100, remember—lie beneath the sheet metal. There are changes you can see—leather seats, 18-inch alloy wheels, new instruments—changes you can feel—improved engines, a new transmission, vastly improved noise, harshness and vibration engineering—and changes you can tally—even more inclusions at even better price points.

There are now four trim levels. Models from the base ES through SE and SEL (that’s L as in leather or luxe) offer Mitsubishi’s 166-hp 2.4L MIVEC 16-valve SOHC 4-cylinder engine, while the Outlander GT features their 224-hp 3.0L MIVEC 24-valve SOHC V6. The SE and SEL volume sellers are available with either front-wheel drive or S-AWC (Super All Wheel Control) all-wheel drive. The base ES is a front-driver only, while the line-topping V6 GT comes with S-AWC only.

Four-cylinder models have a continuously variable transmission (CVT), remapped for quicker acceleration and better power throughput, while the GT has a six-speed automatic with paddle shifters. Zero-to-62 mph acceleration is improved by a full second (AWD versions) and passing speeds are also boosted. The four-cylinder runs on regular fuel; the V6 on premium. Highway fuel mileage for the GT drops from 31 to 27 MPG, but tow capacity increases from 1500 to 3500 pounds.

Suspension has been reengineered, front and rear, for more accurate handling, while reducing vibration and noise. Rear shocks are larger, for a firmer and more comfortable ride. Body rigidity is improved throughout. Reductions in engine, road and wind noise come from dozens of changes, including thicker wheels and more layers of glass. Attention has even been paid to the solid sound of



Product planning manager Melvyn Bautista points out styling cues bearing heritage from Montero to Lancer Evolution. • Long range product planner Nathan Berg reveals the inner workings of the Outlander’s new infotainment systems. • Marketing director Francine Harsini is the creative genius behind Outlander’s clever “100 spokespeople” ad campaign, a powerful and entertaining force multiplier for the new model.



Meet Mitsubishi’s “Dynamic Shield” global styling language. Whether you are more familiar with the face of the five-passenger Outlander Sport, last year’s seven-passenger Outlander or the prior Outlander, this new model is immediately recognizable—a synthesis of the best of them all.



closing a door.

We began our drive by navigating out of San Francisco's busy streets and clogged freeways in the serene cabin of an all-wheel-drive SEL. We spent most of our drive time on the winding coastal two-lanes and hilly wine country roads of the San Francisco Peninsula. The four-cylinder model with CVT was smooth and very responsive under wide-ranging conditions. And we arrived at our classy vineyard lunch spot with a nice sense of style that can be yours at a bargain cost.

All-wheel-drive models include an Eco drive mode (forced 2WD), Normal (with a full range of power distribution left/right, front/rear), Snow mode and Lock mode for maximum traction situations. Our day was spent on warm, dry pavement, though with plenty of climbs, curves and cyclist surprises. We always felt in absolute control.

The price walk from ES to GT is seductively reasonable. From the base ES at \$22,995, up one step to a front-drive SE, you add just \$1000, which gets you 6.1-inch screen-based audio, rear camera, heated seats, keyless entry and start, dual climate control, even color-keyed side mirrors and fog lights. For \$2000 more, add all-wheel drive.

Or for \$1000 more with either drivetrain, move up to the SEL, with leather, power driver's seat, roof rails and gloss black trim accents. (All-wheel-drive SE and front-drive SEL prices overlap).

The GT carries the biggest bump, \$4000, but at \$30,995 you gain 35 percent engine power and that 3500-pound tow capacity, along with a host of premium features and trim cues. Included are everything from a 710-watt Rockford Fosgate audio system to a remote power liftgate (which opens an inch and a half higher than before).

All models have an extensive range of safety and security features, from child safety systems to antitheft features, advanced body construction, traction control and hill start assist. Adaptive cruise control, lane departure warning and forward collision mitigation can be added to the top four-cylinder model or the V6.

There are three packages available for the SEL and one for the GT. Maxed out, you hit \$30,245 on



The Outlander's interior is stylish, clean and purposeful. • Headroom ranges from over 40" in front to just shy of 36" in the third row, legroom from almost 41" in front to 37.3" in the second row and 28.2" in the third row. (Tall headrests can handle an adult, but the third row is best for kids; the headrests can be stashed.) Cargo room ranges from 10.3 cu.ft. with all seats up, to 63.3 cu.ft. behind the first row. Seat folding is done in three easy steps. • Reworked controls and functions—hard keys, knob positions and touchscreen translucence—greatly improve audio and navigation operation and set the stage for Apple CarPlay and Android Auto to join the feature list in the near future.



a front-drive or \$32,245 on an AWD four-cylinder, or \$34,345 on a GT. Warranty is 10/100 powertrain, 5/60 new vehicle, and 5-year roadside.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) has rated Outlander a Top Safety Pick Plus (TSP+) for three years in a row—meeting all its crash tests, plus earning an advanced or superior rating for front crash prevention.



The marketing team wants to make sure your Mitsubishi Outlander awareness level gets a boost this year. There are a lot of brands to consider when you shop for a seven-passenger crossover, and now you are armed with new knowledge. Think of the price of the Mitsubishi Outlander. Think of its 100-plus improvements. Think of the global manufacturing giant who creates it. The engineering team has done everything to satisfy you when you give it a better look. Take a test drive. You should have no trouble picking the model that's best for you, and you will find an exceptional level of value in any of them. ■

