Press Release

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The new Volvo C70 – "Two in One": Hers and sometimes his

An open car really makes a statement about its owner. It is so apparent, it is scarcely a car to drive around in if you want to blend in with the masses. Why then do convertibles have the highest rate of female buyers of all vehicle types? Are women more extrovert than men?

Almost every other convertible sold is bought by a woman. Why do women prefer open top cars? A car that is less practical than most others. Does the convertible spell the final end of the traditional prejudices of women and cars? It should, because the woman/open car-connection is the oldest in the history of motoring.

1st prejudice:
"Women started to drive cars later than men."

In 1888, Berta Benz, wife of Karl (of Daimler-Benz fame), became the first person in history to drive a motor vehicle powered by a petrol-powered internal combustion engine for any significant distance. Sneaking out at dawn with her two sons, she took the tiller of her husband’s invention – which he didn’t dare to try himself – and drove the 80 km from Mannheim to Pforzheim and back again (!) without the slightest mishap. Of course it was an open design, lacking every form of weather protection. Comfort was not yet a key word for road transport at the time. In spite of Mrs. Benz’s trip, it is, however, her husband Karl who has been credited with the first car and thereby with the “invention” of motoring.

A convertible is not very practical. Usually, it is not as roomy as other cars. Usually. It has, however, an advantage over any other vehicle type that makes it so special and desirable. Thanks to its removable top, it conveys a sense of freedom and emotion that no other vehicle type can. The old saying “the sky is the limit” is true when the top is down and the sun is shining.

More women than men
In the US, 53 percent of Volvo buyers are women. Consequently Volvo convertibles are to a very large extent bought by female buyers. In fact no other type of car is purchased by women to such a large extent as convertibles are. This trend is also obvious in other markets such as within the EU. In these countries the percentage of women buyers in the premium segments has risen dramatically in recent years. What makes women choose convertibles with such frequency?

Statistics show that the convertible seldom is the only car in the family garage. It is more likely to be part of a multi-car household featuring two, three or maybe even more cars. This is particularly common in the world’s number 1 convertible market, the United States. Another statistical fact is that the convertible is usually also the only car in a single-person household. Open cars also tend to be more of an urban phenomenon, where the need for a car is perhaps more likely to be interpreted as the yearning for a car. It is used for getting away from the city rather than getting around in it.

You are what you drive
That feeling of freedom without boundaries is emotional and a strong mental experience. Although road regulations have to be obeyed and driving guided by both care and common sense, the ambience with all its sensory impressions goes right to your heart. You wear the car rather than use it. This is where the motto “You are what you drive” comes in. The car you are driving reflects your personality and your values. One might say that driving an open car reveals an open-minded individuality. And research proves this true.
Research that has been carried out concerning purchase behaviour and habits, including the social background and behavioural patterns of convertible customers, points in this direction. Volvo convertible owners are generally people with a modern family mindset. The female owners tend to be creative, with an altruistic attitude towards the surrounding world, very much into social life with family and friends. Enjoying life is an important element.

The male buyers are not very different, but tend to seek a little more of the fun element. Both are strong individuals, open-minded and with social tolerance.

Recent research also reveals that the young urban woman of today is very much aware of the latest fashion and trends, and is on the lookout for unique elements in her life. She is increasingly attracted to different sorts of gadgets and features that relate to her lifestyle. Things that make her existence more pleasant and comfortable, and aesthetically pleasing too. Like a three-piece retractable hardtop...

This may sound like the ideal human being, but this is how independent research, through interviews and data gathering, describes the Volvo convertible buyer.

While on the subject of gender facts, let’s get rid of another “classic” prejudice:

2nd prejudice: “Men are better drivers than women.”

In 1933, British novelist Barbara Cartland organised a ladies vs. men race at Brooklands, using identical open two-seater MGs, to prove that “women can drive as well as men”. The ladies team of Princess Imeretinsky and Lady de Clifford won the race.

Since Brooklands was the first permanent race-track in the world, a lady thereby also became the first person to officially drive on a race-track. On 16 June, 1907, Dame Ethel Locke King led the inaugural procession of cars on to the track in her open Itala, minutes after it had been officially opened by her husband, Brooklands’ creator and sole financier, Sir H. F. Locke King.

Gender matters

In the 1930s, you had to stage a race to prove your point. Since then, numerous international reports have confirmed this fact. Over the years statistics have proved over and over again that women are less accident-prone than men; not only are fewer women than men involved in car accidents, but car accidents are far more often caused by men than by women.

Not only gender but also age has been connected with these kinds of statistics. Young people have tended to be more accident-prone than older drivers and males between the ages of 18 and 25 are over-represented. The most obvious case that elderly female drivers also perform well in traffic comes from the world of comics. Just see how gracefully Grandma Duck always handles her environmentally-friendly Detroit Electric car, as opposed to her reckless grandson Donald in his open two-seater roadster.

3rd prejudice: “Women have not made any significant contributions to the progress of automotive development.”

In 1906, Dorothy Levitt, pioneer motorist (already then!), wrote a book called “The Woman and the Car” in which she advised lady automobilists to carry a little hand-mirror in a convenient place when driving. The main purpose was not to restore her features after driving, but to hold the mirror aloft from time to time in order to see behind while driving in traffic! In other words, the first rear-view mirror. Fixed driving mirrors did not come into use until 1914.

The Female Customer Reference Group...

Ms Levitt can in a way be said to be the very forerunner of the Female Customer Reference Group at Volvo Cars. It was established back in the late 1980s for the purpose of evaluating new car projects from a female customer/user perspective.

Already at an early prototype stage, the women of the reference group are called in to evaluate the project and to look in particular at different solutions; whether they make life difficult or easy for female users. Functionality is a key word. The eight members of the group represent different areas within the company, they have different backgrounds and are of different physical size and age.

Examples of solutions in Volvo cars that stem directly from their assessments and suggestions for improved design and function are child seat and booster seat attachments, carrier bag holders in the luggage compartment, centre armrests and seat folding devices.

Another clearly visible example of the group’s work is the easy-to-identify colour-coding of vital functions under the bonnet in a Volvo car. The oil dipstick is bright red and the oil filler cap is always black, the engine coolant cap always green, the washer fluid filler cap blue and so on. They are also clearly marked with symbols identical to those that appear on the warning and control lamps on the instrument panel.

Moreover, female reference groups from outside Volvo Cars have been used for many years now. One example is the reference group of women that was put together in California during the initial development stages of the Volvo XC90 in the 1990s in order to assess and improve the solutions that eventually went into one of the smartest family
…and the all-women team behind the YCC

Volvo Cars can also feature another ‘first’ in the automotive world: The first vehicle from a female project group – Your Concept Car, YCC; by women for modern people.

The innovative YCC was conceived, designed, engineered and launched by a team of nine women, representing exterior and interior design, safety, engine and chassis engineering and communications. Certain technical solutions and other features clearly indicated that they were the result of years of experience and ideas concerning how things ought to work in order to make life with the car as easy as possible.

Just like men, women who buy premium cars want performance, quality and prestige but they are not satisfied with this. Other features that women really want are good visibility irrespective of body height, a lot of clever storage space, a car that is easy to get in and out of, easy to park and easy to handle. The YCC offers exactly that.

A tribute to an early motorist

In Sweden, the most famous pioneer lady motorist, Alexandra Gjestvang, is honoured every year. The Alexandra Gjestvang Memorial, a rally for classic cars and open only to female contestants, has been run since the mid-80s. Alexandra Gjestvang was the daughter of consul-general E. C. Gjestvang who started to sell cars in Sweden around 1900. At the same time his daughter started to drive, went on to compete and took part in rallies well into the 1930s.

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