If I were the Car Czar - Wendy Venable

January 20th, 2009 by Guest Blog

If I were the Car Czar

1. Where do you believe our industry has opportunity to improve and change?

Our industry has spent the last 3 decades committed to the search for the perfect sales tools. Whether it is the promise of more productive sales people through the implementation of a new, improved, more creative sales process, or a new innovative software program to propel sales through guaranteed accountability, more efficient time management, or whatever else the software can do "better"……the real issue that is rarely if ever addressed, is our inability as an industry to consistently attract, select/hire and then KEEP the more qualified sales professionals.

2. What changes would you make happen if you were the Car Czar?

I would require the industry to review and revamp how we attract, select, develop and manage our sales professionals. I would require each dealership to determine minimum standards for employment and then develop and install a process that supported those "minimum" standards. What and how we have done things in the past hasn’t worked for quite some time and our constant struggle with less than satisfactory sales personnel as well as the chronic turnover most stores experience is proof of this. It is critical that the industry takes a look at HOW we hire, WHY we hire the way we do and WHAT causes talent to leave after we have gotten "lucky" and hired them. Once these questions have been answered a plan can be executed to implement immediate changes that will improve 1) Quality of applicants we attract to our jobs 2) How we choose from those applicants 3) How we develop and manage our talent when we do hire them….in order to prevent them from leaving.

It is imperative that as the Big Three are working to "fix" their issues….we at the retail level are reviewing, constructing and implementing the plan to fine tune how we do things in order to meet the changes within the industry head on, full force with the talent necessary to be better than ever when the dust settles.

No matter how you cut it the road ahead will be bumpy before it gets better…….and when we get to the other side, we better have the right people in our stores handling customers who will have expectations that will be higher than ever!
I believe the Domestic Automotive Manufacturers have to take advantage of the current situation. The Car Business is on its knees as is the country. Now is the time to capitalize on Buy American. Reinstitute an American as Baseball, Hot Dogs and Apple Pie mentality. Stress why people should buy American and back it up with Changes made to assure quality, going green and retention of the traditional American Performance. Highlight gains made with unions to put our manufacturers on an even par with the Foreign Manufactures producing vehicles or shipping vehicles to America. Emphasize that all accrued savings have gone into producing the best vehicles available for American Consumers.

The new Car Zar should mandate that Labor Unions accept wage concessions to put the cost for domestic in line with vehicles being produced by foreign manufacturers in this country. Give the car Zar the clout to do what is necessary to enact these labor union changes. As Regan did with the Airline Controllers, give the Car Zar authority to replace the Unions laborers if needed. No unemployment for Union Members that refuse to work for the administrated wages. The Zar should also be a vocal proponent of Buy American. The Car Zar should work with the Car Companies to establish future programs such as 401K’s to replace the outdated pension and Health Programs now mandated in Union Contracts.
American Car Companies can again be the best Car Companies in the world, producing the best vehicles.

A.J. Costello

Technorati Tags: auto industry crisis, big 3, Car Czar

Posted in If I Were the Car Czar | No Comments »

If I Were The Car Czar - Eric Miltsch

January 20th, 2009 by Eric Miltsch

Car Czar. That’s got a cool ring to it…who wouldn’t want to have "Czar" in their job title?

Congress is calling for someone to be named "Car Czar" to manage the estimated $7 billion-plus marketing budget allocated to the big three.

Whoever gains control of this $7 billion advertising windfall will instantly trump Proctor & Gamble and become the nation’s single largest advertiser. The problem? Who the hell do you put in this position?

Lastly, cross off the politicians and those out of touch with anything A.G. (After Google) Paul Volker is one name being tossed around. Granted, he’s an intelligent guy - but still, he’s an 81 year old economist who helped Jimmy Carter fight stagflation back in the 70’s. How in tune can he be with cutting edge automotive advertising/marketing strategies that will help fix one of our key industries? Other considerations: Nancy Pelosi and attorney Kenneth Feinberg. FAIL#1 & FAIL#2.

If I was the Car Czar, my first order of business would be, (as civil & politically possible) to overhaul our automaker’s health care system. The mission would be to move their systems into the federal health-care system in exchange for an equity investment into the Big Three. The federal system already has a few units like this; taking away the manufacturer’s health-care burden and creating a single-payer system would reduce one of the biggest expenses facing these companies.

The other half of this equation is the union system. The unions are the reason why each vehicle manufactured starts off nearly $2500 in the red. Why are we building manufacturing plants outside of the US, while foreign manufacturers are building plants here? The union system needs to go.

From a product positioning standpoint, I would explore every conceivable option available - from the obscure to the obvious. My goal? Create a massive ripple in the marketing circle. Online channels would be used in ways never seen or experienced before. Google, Yahoo & MSN would be included as strategic partners to allow for maximum cost-efficiencies for paid search. Google’s massive inventory of radio, print and TV ad space needs to be utilized and managed - the cost savings can be upwards of 90% depending on the medium and market chosen.

What else? Mandatory continuing education for the industry. Make them stay on top of the current strategies, technology and the solutions. Doctors, accountants and even members of the IT community are required to maintain current credit standings; no excuse why the auto industry can’t become students of the game as well. Great way to weed out the dinosaurs and change public perceptions.

This can include everything from online strategies to basic website knowledge. (A plethora of training exists, but nobody is forced to attend. And those conducting the current classes have an different motive - they’re selling a product.)
The spending needs to stop. Ford doesn’t need to spend $40 million to name a sports stadium. Don’t tell me it’s branding. It’s Ford. Who is going to forget the name Ford? They would be better off setting up "Ford Online Shopping Kiosks" in the stadium and let customers interact with them at the game. (Hello Microsoft Surface.)

Here’s a short list of the "Obscure Czar" activities:

- My only agency choice: snarky interactive agency **Crispin Porter + Bogusky**. (The guys who made Subservient Chicken and those cool Burger Kings ads) No traditional agencies & Madison Ave. folks. The traditional channel choices are ineffective, expensive and unaccountable. Most importantly, they aren’t doing anything to become the agent of change needed for the industry and especially the consumer’s buying process.
- Increase the amount of user generated content in the form of manufacturer, dealer and end-user feedback. This is the most powerful and trusted information. This is what the public wants to see and hear while doing their online search. And, it’s cheap.
- I would offer massive incentives for ownership options in the Big 3, and also new upstart automotive companies such as Tesla motors, to the oil companies. Give them a solid investment opportunity to diversify and continue to capitalize, even more, on the massive profits they recently made.
- One idea, who’s time has already passed, called for impeccable timing, a ton of risk and a dash of ignorance. Nonetheless, if they had shorted oil futures at 150+ and covered at, say, even 65, it could have created one of the largest profit windfalls ever recorded in modern time.

Am I a long shot? Maybe I’m not too far out of the running….sure would be an awesome challenge though.

Technorati Tags: **auto industry crisis, big 3, Car Czar, Innovation, reinvention**

Posted in **If I Were the Car Czar** | No Comments »

**If I were the Car Czar - Debbi Kroll**

January 5th, 2009 by Guest Blog

1. Where do you believe our industry has opportunity to improve and change?

In order to maximize every opportunity, one must recognize them on all surfaces or facets. They’re in each department, but may not have made it there – **yet**. As Internet manager at Christenson Chevrolet, I realize that every lead/showroom guest is an opportunity to do just that. I delve into each one as a golden opportunity for the dealership and our departments, working to turn the consumer into our **customer**. For life. With so many manufacturers, and many dealerships, you **can** be the chosen one.

Whether a consumer walks in the brick and mortar showroom, or is a virtual shopper, one may be sure he’s looking for just a few things when getting starting. This can be adapted for any department.

**Brick and Mortar**: A welcome. You have been chosen and you’d better take that opportunity to extend your gratitude and put your best foot forward. Be knowledgeable, sincere, and patient, yet goal - oriented. It’s the road to the sale. Sometimes it’s smooth, and sometimes you’re 4 - wheelin’! Are you a licensed driver?

**Virtual**: A reply. One that’s not canned. A sincere effort to provide the requested information, in a **timely** manner, while sharing important facts, offering alternates, and the call to action. You must stand out! Share information that will speed the process to contact you, and provide facts. Again, be goal oriented. It’s the road to the sale. The call to action.

2. What changes would you make happen if you were the Car Czar?

First and foremost, a new hire dealership - wide "Welcome Wagon.” I’d love to know...
how many actually do this. Each department would invite the new hire into their department for a tour, introduction to staff, explanation of duties and processes, tidbits that makes them special, and what they’d like you to share with your customers. Not just an introduction. Let them ask questions. When we’re comfortable, it shows. We can extend that to our guests. They’ll sense the camaraderie. Priceless!

Best Regards,

Debbi Kroll

Technorati Tags: auto industry restructuring, bailouts, Car Czar, If I Were the Car Czar, innovate, reinvent

Posted in If I Were the Car Czar | No Comments »

If I were the Car Czar - Jeffrey Rozany

If I was the Car Czar I would eliminate duplication in the automotive segment. One of General Motors biggest dilemmas was the similarity of models competing amongst themselves for market share. For far too long all of the sister brands under the G.M. flag made similar models with just subtle differences this created confusion for the customer. Additionally by having so many models and so many option packages the manufacturing process became bogged down in mix and match scenarios. The sheer size of G.M. limited their ability to continually have fresh cars to keep up with the influx of Asian products. These are two distinct issues that G.M. should be forced to deal with in order to qualify for the Federal relief that is being made available to them.

Moving forward the entire industry should examine the size of the legacy that is left for previous employees. This is a tremendous expense that is levied upon every aspect of our business. I believe pensions are adding billions of dollars in expenses to each manufactures balance sheet. The best solution would be an investment program that the employee has some control over. Having to pay people virtually forever eventually will bankrupt even the best run companies in America.

In the showrooms across the country salespeople will need to reinvent that approach to the customer. The customer base is dwindling and the competition is fierce to retain each and every one of them. Customer service will be the key to profitability for the foreseeable future. I often tell my salespeople if they work a little more intelligently than the next guy they may on average pick up an additional ½ unit per week it doesn’t sound like much but it annualizes to 26 cars. I have 6 salespeople that work for me so you do the math. Even though we are in a challenging environment there are still sales to be made. Good luck

JEFFREY ROZANY

GENERAL SALES MANAGER

BAYRIDGE VOLVO

Technorati Tags: auto industry restructuring, bailout, Car Czar, If I Were the Car Czar, Innovation, reinvent

Posted in If I Were the Car Czar | No Comments »

If I were the Car Czar - David Swan

My family playfully calls it the Swan Doctrine, we have been sharing this idea since October
The Auto Industry is very vital to us all for many reasons, so let’s give them a true working man’s bone. Let’s take the money we are about to consider bailing them out and give it to the people that will spur the economy. Give a tax credit to each individual that buys a Ford, Chrysler or GM vehicle a $10,000 dollar tax credit. If we can allocate $34 billion in a tax credit like this we can move over 3.4 million new units, that will change our economy within 6 months. It will spur local area creditors to loan money, it will employ the dealerships and the employees and businesses around those businesses, and above all it will force the Big Three to become more competitive, immediately, on their own. We cannot give them money and say become more competitive, we have to show them that this is limited one time fix that they can either take advantage of it or not. If they do, they will come out of this creating their own success to profitability.

A little something about me…

I moved from the East Coast to Detroit over 20 years ago to learn all about the Automotive Industry. I worked for automotive suppliers and in 1993 began my own automotive communication business which I still run today. I felt the Auto Industry was moving the wrong way back in 2005 and closed my office (Canton, MI) with dozens of full time employees and decided to move out of state (PA) and recreate my automotive business virtually. I currently have about 56 people that work for me from home and we help the automotive business compete for service every day. Our company works with GM, Ford, BMW, Toyota, Nissan, Mercedes-Benz and Honda. The company is Custom Programs, Incorporated and we specialize in market intelligence using our wholly owned subsidiary called IntelChek.

Good luck!

David Swan

Technorati Tags: auto industry bailout, Car Czar, If I Were the Car Czar, Restructuring

Posted in If I Were the Car Czar | 1 Comment »

If I Were Car Czar - David Book

January 2nd, 2009 by David Book

Considering what I would do if I were appointed Car Czar sounded like a fun exercise. Of course, actually being Car Czar would certainly be a challenge. There are literally hundreds of different ways our industry could change, many of which are needed. This writing will deal with two specific questions. First, where does the auto industry have an opportunity to improve or change? And second, what changes would I make happen if I were the Car Czar? The auto industry as a whole is in serious trouble and several key changes are necessary to help ensure it’s viability. Individual sectors of the industry each have their own issues. We are discussing the industry as a whole, not individual sectors, brands, or markets.

Where does the auto industry have an opportunity to improve or change? The biggest challenge facing the industry is simple, consumers are buying less cars – demand is down worldwide. The two biggest reasons consumers are buying less cars are obvious. First, cars cost much more than ever and folks just can’t afford a new car when it costs half a years salary – or more. And second, cars
last longer today than ever before – why replace something that doesn’t need replacing? Changes associated with increasing demand are needed - badly. Traditionally, one way to increase demand is effective marketing and advertising. I would imagine that auto manufacturers spend hundreds of millions annually (billions?) on factory sponsored ads. The amount of money spent on advertising by manufacturers needs to change. Another way to increase demand is to lower the cost of the product itself. The trap is obvious, if carmakers don’t advertise, costs go down and so does demand. If carmakers do advertise, demand goes up but costs / prices do also, lowering demand. How can we continue advertising to drive demand up, while also cutting advertising costs, to lower the price to the consumer, also driving demand up? The cost of manufacturing needs to be lowered, badly.

OPPORTUNITY IDEA #1: The Federal government could regulate advertising-caps for manufacturers. Auto manufactures could only spend up to the cap on advertising. The idea is similar to campaign finance rules, or major league sports. I’m not advocating less advertising, I’m advocating more effective advertising. Consider this: How much exposure did Barrack Obama create with his advertising budget compared to a major manufacturer with the same budget? I would bet considerably more. Pressure, rules and competition would force advertisers (and publishers) to get creative (and save money) about advertising and make better use of this huge part of their budget. The cap could be on a per-unit basis. So, I, the Car Czar declare that auto manufactures can only spend up to $100 per-car built annually on advertising. Ideally, a savings would be realized on a per-car basis driving prices down (but not profitability) and demand up.

OPPORTUNITY IDEA #2: Tax motorists that drive vehicles older than X years old because they consume more, pollute more, and are less safe (costing the public more in health, traffic and other issues). Use the tax revenue to incentivize buying new vehicles. a) offer a cash rebate for cash buyers and b) offer a government backed, guaranteed, low-interest loan program. for new vehicles Sorry finance companies, the Car Czar is trying to fix the auto industry, not the banking industry. Take the cash or get the rate – consumers decide. This plan would be funded entirely buy the tax payers that drive older vehicles and would certainly increase demand. If the feds can guarantee home loans, why not auto loans too? Car Czar says: You drive an old car, you pay a tax that funds federal new auto purchase incentives.

OPPORTUNITY IDEA #3: Add a line on federal tax-return forms to require motorists to report annual miles driven – penalize motorists that drive X miles over a regional average. Use the revenue paid by “excessive motorists” to fund a national advertising campaign to buy newer, cleaner, safer, cars. This idea ties into idea 1. If there is a cap on advertising we can assume that there would be a drop in advertising for new cars, the feds campaign may help make up the difference. The feds could fund their own advertising campaign to further increase demand. Car Czar says: You drive a car more than average Joe, you pay a tax that funds federal advertising campaigns.

Increasing taxes is not appealing and I am generally against increased taxes. But, in light of the current climate, we the consumers will all share the burden of the auto industries inability to stay in business. Like it or not, we all need the
auto industry to stay afloat and we are all going to pay for it anyway, why not know what we are paying?

On to question number two…. 

What changes wold I make happen if I were the Car Czar? Along with the three opportunities listed above, I would advocate “educational engineering.” This is a term I just made up, funny. Competition among carmakers is fierce, as it should be, and many of the dollars spent within an organization are spent on research and development. We all know the value of having the latest, trendy, cool, and hip cars on the ground – everybody wants one! The problem is, carmakers cannot afford to continue to develop new cars, new technology, and new ways of exciting the public. Concept cars are just too darned expensive. If the industry as a whole is failing (do you know any carmakers that are making money?) what good does the “future car” serve if we will never realize it anyway (because we went out of business five years before it’s debut). Yeah, I know, we still need to research and develop, we do have a future after-all. Next, we need to make sure the people that build the cars, sell the cars, or work on the cars, actually buy new cars. I saw photo the other day of a parking lot a GM plant, it was amazing how many old, rusty, clunker cars there were. Come on guys, support the cause, the Car Czar is trying to save your job.

CHANGE IDEA #1 Educational institutions and others are encouraged to submit their “concepts” to manufacturers. This idea is simple, tested, and effective. There are all kinds of examples of university teams, private individuals and others competing in competitions to build a better mouse-trap, get to the moon, go to space-and-back in the same day, heck, write a “If I Were Car Czar” document. A university with an engineering department, and a design department, could develop ongoing and permanent relationships with manufacturers. Many universities already do vehicle design and could stand to gain a great deal by earning revenue from future sales. The difference is simple, if their concepts are never realized, they are not out anything – they are already practicing and studying these concepts to begin with. If they do get realized they stand to earn a little to subsidize their university. I can imagine the Big-Ten pickup or the ACC Sedan or the PAC-Ten sports car. It’s college football weekend, I couldn’t resist. Relationships like this may already exist, I have no idea. But, I would advocate a large scale change in the way cars are engineered and designed in order to save huge amounts of money, lowering costs, increasing sales.

CHANGE IDEA #2 Auto manufacturer employees, dealership employees, repair shop employees and others working directly in the auto industry could get a tax break for buying new cars. It could work like this. If you have an auto loan and work in the auto-industry, the amount of your car-payment could be pre-tax, like an IRA. The loan could be interest free (see earlier ideas for funding). And, if your employer is willing to administer your “federal auto account” we, the feds, with the help of the Car Czar, could extend him or her a small business tax credit for helping the cause.

There are hundreds and hundreds of ways to improve the auto industry, each with it’s own potential benefits and consequences. Regardless of who is in charge, what manufacturers are building, and what consumers are driving, if consumers don’t want to buy, or cannot afford to buy new cars, our industry is
dooded. If there is a Car Czar, his or her priority must always be associated with increasing (or at least maintaining) demand and lowering costs. My simple ideas may or may not be viable, but, they do represent several ways to increase demand and lower costs. I enjoyed brainstorming this topic and look forward to hearing the ideas of others in our industry, the nations industry, the worlds industry.

Fingers Crossed!
David Book

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Technorati Tags: auto industry bailout, Car Czar, If I Were the Car Czar, Innovation, Restructuring

Posted in If I Were the Car Czar | No Comments »

If I were the “Car Czar” - Shelly Peacock

December 29th, 2008 by Guest Blog

I am a former Vendor Executive, current Buying agent, and wife of a Dealer Principle. Having viewed this problem from several different angles, I have a great solution; see below…

1. Where do you believe our industry has opportunity to improve and change?

Opportunity is always more readily available in a down turned market, one just needs to know where to look. As the credit crunch continues, there is more room for local banks to step up, thus building stronger local communities, and a sense of neighborhood awareness.

There is also a greater opportunity in the service market, as consumers are holding onto vehicles longer than normal, thus the service departments are missing the gold mine. One of my clients increased his service business substantially with an oil change special that blasted out immediately following Christmas, thus increasing his hours per RO from 1.1 to 1.7 in a very short time, by offering to help customers keep their cars running longer with preventative maintenance that ordinarily would have never been sold.

As far as sales change… I believe that the US is in dire need to shed the myth that all car people are shysters out to screw them. If negotiation became a miniscule detail that didn’t pervade the industry, more consumers would purchase vehicles.

I’m not talking about the almost defunct Saturn theory, but if you see below, a radical "across the industry" change is needed. Think value added, not
2. **What changes would you make happen if you were the Car Czar?**

If I were the Car Czar with government backing and support, I would immediately force collusion by all auto makers with products in the US or Imported into the US to cease immediately with all incentives, rebates, and similar consumer driven practices that created this nightmare initially. The Automotive industry will never regain any momentum if the general public keeps waiting to see what the next big incentive is. BMW has the right idea by increasing prices to maintain price and value integrity, as well as catapulting their products into an even more desirable position. Since aid has been given with strings attached, use the strings to create a fair market.

Save the discounts for used vehicles, and start selling all vehicles in the US for what they are actually worth. Based on a level playing field of vehicle stats and comps, maintain fair pricing across the board. Competition is a good thing, so use the government leverage to force all automakers to compete with vehicle quality, not price, and use value added (i.e. Service incentives) commodities to compete.

Shelly Peacock

Techmoneat Tags: auto industry crisis, bailout, Car Czar, If I Were the Car Czar, Innovation

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**If I Were Car Czar - John Bonar**

December 17th, 2008 by Guest Blog

While many people view the Automotive Bailout as a great idea, let’s take a look at the current state of the industry. The Big three are bleeding like stuck pigs, and the imports are eating up market share and rolling in liquid capital. Well to be honest Ford, GM, and Chrysler are in bad shape, but what is the worst thing is that everyone keeps trying to act like it is business as normal. The big three need to get their eyes back on the game and quit trying to eek this month out when they need to look to the long term. I have an action plan that will tighten up belts and turn red ledger entries into black ledger entries.

**Step one, Let the thing we never though could happen, occur. (Yup, that’s right GM heading to bankruptcy court)**

General Motors needs to seek chapter 11 Bankruptcy protection, GM’s problems are so bad that 250 billion couldn’t solve them. Chapter 11 Bankruptcy right now could actually help the stock price of GM right now. In Chapter 11 GM can seek to renegotiate labor contracts, force dealerships to realign to GM’s plans, allow them to leverage some of the liquid capital in GMAC (who by the way is making tons of money, yet they keep wanting to sell it off). Ford may be the redhead stepchild according to some, but Ford has been working to realign itself for the past several years, I think they will still need to enter bankruptcy in order to straighten out a lot of their dealer and supplier problems. Chrysler, Daimler wants to drop this company like a bad habit, yet no one wants to buy it, well a few private equity firms do, and to be honest...
Dieder needs to take them up on the offer. Chrysler is in such bad shape right now, I don’t have a clue what can be done, short of selling the company to GM (who then can take bonds on the property of Chrysler and homogenize them into the GM family.

Step two, rethink the way we make, & sell cars.

Ever been to the Janesville, WI plant for GM. I was there in the summer of this year (2008), I saw in the storage lot NEW 2005 GMC 5500’s that were made for pool that were never sold to anybody and they have sat there since they rolled out of the factory (minus a time or two to move them to push snow), This isn’t an unusual sight at any GM final assembly plant (with the exaction of one, Bowling Green, more on why Corvette/XLR is the example GM should follow). Just in time production, Toyota, Nissan, Kia, even FIAT are on this method. What does it mean, it means you have less metal rusting in your storage lots, eating up vital capital that can be spent elsewhere (like making a car that someone wants). This next step is going to irk a lot of franchisees out there but GM needs to go back to it’s roots, but to be blunt, GM needs to offer it’s product line across the board (Hummer and Saturn Excluded), yes that means your going to have competing franchise, but the only way you can possibly do that is to get it done in bankruptcy protection.

Step 3 Make the UAW become competitive, along with vendors.

This isn’t an attack on the UAW, but they need to get their head out of their nether region, because if GM’s largest cost is pensioners and health insurance over steel, something needs to be fixed. I don’t’ advocate a government bailout, but GM did setup a trust that the UAW shot down (because the UAW couldn’t control the investments). Benefits should be competitive with the rest of the industry. It’s a sad that that GM could close several of it’s factories and build new ones elsewhere in the US and save money in doing so, and still pay a great wage with great benefits. "We can’t allow the workers to bear any more brunt of this" Everyone at the Big Three need to shoulder some of this burden, and this should happen. Becoming competitive needs to happen at all levels, not just at the mid to top. Vendors need to straighten out their act, some of these companies are just raping the companies for parts. This needs to stop and only bankruptcy will give the companies the leverage they need to force fair and competitive pricing.

Step 4 Keep control of the markets we have great numbers in. Run the business like a business.

Buick is the number one brand in China, but we can’t rest on any laurels. Thinking you got it easy on top makes it that much easier to knock you off, and Toyota seemed to do a great job of sneaking up there. Now The Big Three are hurting because everyone let things go. And finally run your business like a business, you’re here to make money for everyone involved, and right now, me as a stockholder isn’t making any money.
Either way we see the companies go, it’s not going to get better anytime soon, but the only thing right now these ships need is drydock, because bailing out with buckets isn’t going to help much at all when you’re already up to your neck in the water.

By: John Bonar ACP ACMT

Technorati Tags: Auto industry, Car Czar, Future, Innovation, Restructure

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