

Promoting Your Minicar

By Carl Jensen in Austin, Texas

I have often thought about promoting my Isetta 300 and Messerschmitt KR200 to ad agencies and video production companies. But the uncertainties and hassles kept me from making much progress. This article will recount a recent experience I had and suggest some things you may want to consider if you would like to promote and rent out your car(s).

A few years ago I rented my 1975 Rolls-Royce to a movie company after being contacted by a man that had approached our local car club. He was in the business of locating cars for production companies, so everything was easy. My car was parked (not driven) at a country club for a few days, and I earned \$200/day. I was later approached two more times by other production companies to park the car on their sets, but one offered only \$60 a day and the other deal fell through at the last minute when the shoot was cancelled.

We threw a big party last Christmas, and a person that accompanied one of our guests was very interested in the minicars and asked the usual spate of questions. I didn't remember much about him until his associate later contacted me to see if his production company could rent one the cars for a few days. It turned out that our party guest worked for a software company called Tivoli, and they had commissioned a 90-second video to show at press conferences to promote their new office in Rome.

I then had to make a decision whether to face the uncertainties and make some money off the car or decide that it was not worth the hassle. I had several concerns:

- Were the cars in good enough shape to withstand three days of driving in an expensive video production?
- Did I have the time for this since I work days?
- What about transporting the cars?
- Who would be driving them, and would the person know how use the Isetta's stick shift or the Messerschmitt's motorcycle-type shifter?
- If something broke due to the driver's inexperience, would I be making enough money to cover the cost of repairs on top of making enough money for my time?

My questions and doubts kept mounting and I was very concerned by the time I agreed to let the production company use one of the cars. The decision was all the more painful since I had put so much time and love into the restorations, but I figured this would be an ideal way to find out if it was something that I wanted to pursue in the future. We agreed that one car would be selected and that it would rent for \$250/day for about 6 hours each day.

I was relieved when the Isetta was selected rather than the Messerschmitt, especially since the Messerschmitt had begun to run erratically (carburetor adjustment), and the fact

that it is the more difficult car to drive and shift. I also felt fortunate that the actress who was to drive the Isetta knew how to drive stick shifts, so after a short lesson I felt more comfortable having her do the driving.

However, there were some things I hadn't anticipated and that I will be certain to clarify when I do this again. I had assumed that the production company would keep the Isetta for the three days of shooting, but it turned out that I had to deliver and pick up the car for each day's shooting. Since the shoots were done in the evening this did not interfere with my day job, but one night the shooting did not end until 2am! I also found it was necessary to be present during the shoots in case problems occurred. We did have a problem – the emergency brake cable stuck (a pretty easy fix for me, but the production people would have had no clue if they had to make the repairs themselves). So for future rentals I will need to factor in my time and delivery changes.

Based on my limited experience so far, I have decided to promote my three cars to the following groups:

- Ad agencies
- Local businesses
- Video production companies
- Texas Film Commission
- Private parties (e.g. free rides at birthday parties)
- Car Locators – the people who professionally locate cars for use by production companies

To do this in a professional manner and maximize my profits, I plan to use these methods:

1. I will use my scanner and photo imaging software (what a great excuse to buy this equipment!) with the best photo I have of each of the three cars. These three photos will be printed with a color inkjet printer (another good excuse to buy a new printer) onto one side of sheet of paper – like a headshot. On the other side of the paper will be text describing each car including pricing, contact information, etc. This two-sided sheet will then be photocopied and distributed to the groups listed above.
2. Most Internet Service Providers now include a free Web site for each of their subscribers, and this will often include easy-to-use software to construct a site on your own. I will create my own Web site with information similar to that used on my flyers, with maybe a few more pictures depending on how big a site I am permitted.
3. I am pricing 6 x 10' utility trailers so that I can transport the cars to areas farther away from my home. I expect that this will give a more professional presentation as well as increase my market area, although the trailer will not look too great parked on the side of our house.
4. I will make a small laminated sign with magnetic backing (sheets of flexible magnetic backing are inexpensive) to put on my cars when I have them out driving around town. This sign will direct people to my Web site, give a phone number, and include a brief note saying that the cars are available for rent.

5. I am purchasing additional spare parts and tools as backups, especially to take with me on the shoots. This will include spare tires, extra cables and other items that are most likely to break.
6. I will compose a generalized contract (nothing too elaborate) that will help avoid any misunderstandings. This will include pricing, transportation charges, what the car will be used for, who will be driving the car, time limits, etc. I will also specify when the payment is due – preferably on the last day the car is used.
7. I will print some business cards on my computer printer (with today's color inkjet printers and paper stock these can look very professional) to keep with me to give to the many people who see the cars and have questions. I believe this may turn out to be a great method for word-of-mouth advertising.
8. I will file for a DBA (Doing Business As) for a business name. This only costs about \$10 in Texas and is good for a number of years. I will also open a separate free business checking account through my credit union. I believe that this will satisfy the IRS, since I intend to operate this as a small (very small) business take advantage of tax deductions. If you plan to go this route, be sure to check with an accountant since there may be some limitations on what you can deduct for restoration expenses, etc.
9. I will need to investigate insurance considerations to be certain that I have adequate coverage, especially for liability. The local tax office will also need to be contacted for sales tax considerations.

I hope this article will help if you decide to promote your car(s). I believe that correct pricing will be a challenge, especially considering potential repair costs, time involved, etc. It may all turn out to be too much of a hassle, and I am sure that some potential customers will think that the prices are too high since they don't realize all that is involved. But there is nothing like getting that final check when the job is over!