

A Porsche too far?

Is the Cayenne, Porsche's new entrant into the S.U.V. market, a 'devastating breach' on the part of the brand, as Porsche loyalists say, or is it a natural brand extension, as the makers of Porsche assert?

This is a subject that will be debated in chat rooms and Porsche clubs around the world for months to come. Will it erode the brand by alienating its loyal base? Or will the Cayenne strengthen it in the face of increased competition and broader consumer demand? Initial sales figures won't settle the issue. Nor will the current irate comments posted on loyalist Web sites. The debate raises a critical issue and one for brands everywhere—be they venerable or nascent—to consider.

Brand Elasticity. How Far Can One Stretch?

We call it brand elasticity, or how far a brand can stretch before it breaks. Here's the thing about brand elasticity: it's not a distance fixed by anyone but those who are the daily stewards of the brand. If the arduous work has been done to clearly and rigorously define the 'brand essence' then the answer to the question, 'should we be making this sub-line?' and 'is this brand extension going too far?' become a lot easier to answer.

If Porsche has done the work required to answer 'what must every Porsche always be no matter what form it takes?' and even more importantly, 'what must Porsche never make?' then it has the right to remain unperturbed by the hysterical objections logged on Porsche message boards. If, however, it has launched the Cayenne opportunistically, taking advantage of the booming S.U.V. market, post-rationalizing the decision when it must, then Porsche marketing managers have good reason to lose sleep at night. (If I were them, I wouldn't log on-line at 3 AM.)