

"The automakers are smart enough to realize that this is a market they should try to capture," says Harry Wyman of Ethnic Marketing Services. "There is this great untapped market out there, and the right celebrity can hold a lot of credibility."

Particularly with more-impressionable youth who are engaged in music and sports. That's why a 2004 commercial for the Volvo S40 included a voiceover by LL Cool J, and why Buick got with Tiger Woods. Then there are Snoop Dogg's Chrysler 300 commercials with Lee Jacocca, "Hustle and Flow" star Terrance Howard's relationship with DaimlerChrysler Corp., and the new Jeep Commander in Missy Elliot's "Lose Control" music video.

Whether it's to shake a staid image, polish a struggling brand, or forage for new buyers, car companies are aiming right for the source.

Not that the power of personality is new. Even 25 years ago one in three TV commercials used celeb endorsements. In 1987, after Run DMC's hit "My Adidas," the athletic shoemaker hooked up with the rap group, sponsoring one of its tours. Seven years later, when Snoop Dogg's "Gin and Juice" hit the charts, sales of Tanqueray Gin rose 10 percent.

Celebs know the score too, and will often make the first call. Rapper Ludacris, for example, is said to have approached Pontiac about the Pontiac Solstice. Though known more for his muscle car jones, Ludacris began appearing in Solstice commercials last December, aired mostly on cable television's BET. The rapper also wanted to associate a hot-selling car with the video to his cut "Two Miles an Hour," in which he calls out "everybody that put mo' into they cars than they do

their relationship."

Says Mark-Hans Richer, marketing manager of Pontiac: "Pontiac has this great, youthful personality to it, and obviously Ludacris is young, credible and has a great personality. It's smart business, really."

Though it's too early to tell whether the spots work, Richer says he's happy with the feedback. This isn't Pontiac's first foray into the Black celeb promo biz, however. Actor Samuel Jackson has done



▲ Macy Gray's Heavy Duty Hummer H2 at Shaquille O'Neal's Annual All Car Showdown, sponsored by GM.

◀ Derek Luke and the Hummer H3 at GM's TEN event.

voiceovers and Oprah Winfrey had that famous G6 giveaway.

Ford Motor Co. appears poised to take the African-American star endorsement bit to another level. For one, rapper Kanye West has a relationship with Ford's Lincoln brand. The Zephyr — Lincoln's first entry-level sedan — is featured in West's video "Drive Slow." In turn, Lincoln sponsored West's posh after-gig at the Grammy Awards this year. And, Lincoln is celebrating the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance in a new commercial featuring the Zephyr. Slated to air on select stations through June 6, the spots pay homage to legendary poet Langston Hughes, renowned filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, and historic Harlem.

What's more, DJ and car guru Funkmaster Flex is touring with tricked-out Fusions and F-150s. And with a suc-

cessful advertising relationship on the "Steve Harvey Morning Show," Ford is sponsoring premieres of Harvey's latest comedic standup film, "Don't Trip ... He Ain't Through With Me Yet." The Fusion is showcased at each premier, while being marketed to urban consumers through its grownandsexy.com Web site. The film venues also feature the F-150 and Explorer.

In addition, Lincoln recently launched a new lifestyle custom Web site —lincolnlounge.com — that allows visitors a chance to win a Mark LT luxury pickup customized by NBA legend Magic Johnson. And in April, Lincoln started a 10-city tour with R&B group New Edition, featuring the Zephyr. "It is part of a broader effort to reposition Lincoln within the urban market," says Lincoln brand manager Tom Grill. "To immerse our