



September 28, 2008

Will 'Flash of Genius' be trouble for Ford?

BY SARAH A. WEBSTER
FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

As if Ford Motor Co. doesn't have enough problems.

The automaker has lost almost \$24 billion over the past 2 1/2 years, shed more than 50,000 jobs and can't predict when it will make money again.

And now this: "Flash of Genius," a mainstream movie, paints Ford as the greedy corporate villain, tapping into a national strain of anti-corporate, anti-Detroit emotion that could dissuade would-be Ford customers.

The movie is the Hollywood version of Kearns v. Ford Motor Co., a 1978 lawsuit in which the late inventor of the intermittent windshield wiper, former Wayne State University professor Robert Kearns, accuses Ford of stealing his patented idea.

Kearns eventually wins the battle with Ford, after decades of legal battles and at great personal expense.

Ford spokeswoman Jennifer Moore notes that a jury that reviewed the case found that Ford did not willfully violate Kearns' patent. And while she also said "there are inaccuracies in the film," she refused to detail them.

"Ford sees no value in rehashing the history of a case that has already been resolved in a court of law almost 20 years ago," she said, repeatedly emphasizing: "It's a movie."

When asked whether Ford was concerned about the movie's impact on the company's image or consumers, she said, "our reputation is -- and should be -- based on our 100-year legacy of providing transportation to the world."

But as the nation contemplates a \$700-billion bailout package for Wall Street, this movie might resonate with viewers, said Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies who focuses on media and popular culture at the University of Buffalo.

"I think that Ford is very vulnerable," she said.

Michael Bernacchi, a marketing professor at the University of Detroit Mercy, said Ford should not take this movie lightly, even if it is a box-office bomb.

"The American public, they're not very sympathetic to the U.S. auto industry," said Bernacchi, who believes some consumers are mad at Detroit's automakers over quality, safety and environmental issues.

When GM was accused of killing the electric car in a 2006 movie, the automaker responded with the Chevrolet Volt electric car, which aims to come to market in 2010.

"My next project may be called 'Who Resurrected the Electric Car?' " joked Chris Paine -- director of "Who Killed the Electric Car?" -- moments after GM unveiled the Volt concept at the 2007 Detroit auto show.

Bernacchi said that Ford needs to take similar action.

"If I was the PR guy on this one, what I would do is ... apologize for a different time in the industry," he said. "This is not a time to deny. ... The no-comment will get them nowhere."

Ford, for its part, seems to have addressed some of the issues surrounding idea-sharing.

The company has a Web site, www.FordNewIdeas.com, where inventors can submit ideas in a way that is designed to protect both sides.

On the site, Ford advises: "We strongly recommend that, before you present your idea to us, you consult a patent attorney for professional advice."

Contact **SARAH A. WEBSTER** at 313-222-5394 or swebster@freepress.com.
