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# Brand Loyalty in the Automotive Community: A Case Study on the Chevrolet Corvette

Michele Ann Motichka  
*University of South Florida*

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BRAND LOYALTY IN THE AUTOMOTIVE COMMUNITY:  
A CASE STUDY ON THE CHEVROLET CORVETTE

by

MICHELE A. MOTICHKA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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University of South Florida

Major Professor: Kenneth C. Killebrew, Ph.D.  
Randy E. Miller, Ph.D.  
Larry Z. Leslie, Ph.D.

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## Brand Loyalty in the Automotive Community:

### A case study on the Chevrolet Corvette

Michele A. Motichka

#### ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative case study conducted to investigate the relationship between consumers who are brand loyal to a certain product and the groups that are formed to bring these enthusiasts together, using the Chevrolet Corvette and its community as a model. Qualitative research lends itself to studying relationships and social situations, in being able to observe and participate in a social context, rather than analyzing it from the outside looking in. By approaching this subject as a case study, an element of flexibility was allowed. This study primarily focuses on one main phenomena, the social groups formed by loyal consumers. The specific context studied is the Chevrolet Corvette's community.

By using in-depth interviews of Corvette enthusiasts, owners and company employees, a deeper understanding of why people are loyal to a product and how they use enthusiast clubs to sustain their loyalty will be uncovered. Those interviewed were asked open-ended questions pertaining to their feelings about the community they are a part of, and the brand they are loyal to. A qualitative, ethnographic approach was taken, and interviews were conducted more as conversations than as formal, structured interviews.

Through participant observation at various Corvette events, the researcher compared what participants said and what they were observed doing. Participants are from varying backgrounds, ages and genders as to provide a broad base of information.

Data gathered were analyzed using grounded theory, a research method that seeks to develop theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered. Grounded theory allows for a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis. Three overarching themes were constructed to organize the data, with various sub-categories to further explain the findings.

The results of this study have shown that the object of enthusiasm, in this case the Chevrolet Corvette, is the basis for social interaction between owners and those involved with the car. While the physical car must uphold a superior standard, the consumer loyalty shown in this community is reinforced through interpersonal relationships formed with others sharing a common interest of enthusiasm for the automobile.

The research has shown that there is a linkage between media efforts, automobile purchase, and social interaction. A cycle is formed from company executives releasing information and marketing to the public, inspiring consumers to purchase the car, and the community reinforces their purchase decision and fosters their brand loyalty.

## Introduction

Automobiles have been a part of the American cultural landscape for more than a century, but only recently (as compared to the country's history) has the loyalty some consumers feel toward their car of choice presented itself so prominently in their lives. "Car culture" has sprung up everywhere, whether it be the historical connection older Americans feel toward antique cars, the baby boomer nostalgia of muscle cars, or the more recent West Coast Generation X popularity of Japanese sport compact cars. Clubs are forming rapidly to meet the growing demand of car enthusiasts from coast to coast. Many members of car clubs devote large portions of their time to the club's events which can be statewide, national, or international.

This seems to be the case with the Chevrolet Corvette. Not only are there club chapters in each state, some boasting membership of more than 200 people, and national clubs with nearly 6,000 members, but this particular automobile also has an independently owned National Museum, and a national club governing body (the National Council of Corvette Clubs or NCCC) that coordinates events incorporating each of the localized clubs that belong to the council. Corvette specific events even carry overseas; for example, a yearly event brings enthusiasts to France for their annual LeMans racing event. Many members making this trip choose to put their cars on carrier boats, enabling them to have their Corvette overseas for a caravan drive from England to France.

The Chevrolet Corvette is an intriguing automobile which has been worshipped by many since it first rolled off the assembly line in Flint, Michigan, in 1953. In a time of American patriotism, the Corvette became known as the American sports car. How it became known as this is another point of curiosity. How did consumers develop the notion that this car was indeed "the" American sports car? Was it from advertising, personal opinions, editorials, or possibly its inclusion in a prominent television show of the past (beginning with Route 66, which featured a 1962 Corvette)? Furthermore, why is the Chevrolet Corvette more popular than ever in the year 2003? Why are many of the same people who dreamed about owning the first Corvette still loyal to the car? Why have clubs started by enthusiasts (as opposed to car clubs created by manufacturers) sustained and often exceeded their membership over the course of twenty years? Do advertising, marketing, and promotional activities play a role in the creation and reinforcement of consumer loyalty? Do peer groups influence loyalty?

This research intends to examine the answers to these questions. Its purpose is to discover what makes an enthusiast loyal to his or her product, using the Corvette as a model. What factors lead to reinforced owner enthusiasm towards the Corvette, specifically by those involved in a club or internally involved with the brand? While encompassing multiple aspects of the brand's character, this research will investigate how loyalty forms and the behaviors that result from that loyalty.

More specifically, this research will examine qualitatively the social phenomenon surrounding this enthusiast group, including the social constructions group members hold. In approaching this subject through qualitative research, attention will be placed on



individual characteristics of the group being studied, but with the possibility for cross-over analysis of other similar groups.

Studying this topic of consumer loyalty and its relation to social groups is beneficial for a variety of disciplines including communications, marketing and advertising, and psychology. Through communication, both mass and interpersonal, we can begin to understand consumer motivations and resulting behavior. Marketers and advertisers can look to research like this to plan successful campaigns aimed at enticing consumers to try or continue using their product. Psychologists can benefit from the cognitive element of the research, such as the self-concept and identity issues that will be addressed.

This study is a cultural, ethnographic, qualitative case study on the Chevrolet Corvette. It will include both participant observation and in-depth interviews. The research questions are: What keeps people loyal to this car over time? What does the brand mean to them? What benefits do they gain from club membership? Does marketing or advertising influence their feelings about the car? Are their loyal behaviors influenced by peer relationships? What kinds of social constructions do these people hold?

## Review of Literature

### *A Brief History of American Automobiles*

America's fascination with the automobile can be traced through history to the creation of the assembly line, made possible by Henry Ford, making mass production of cars more economically feasible for automakers. In turn, the dream of owning an automobile was within the reach of a common person's budget. While in the early days, cars were used as a necessity, as time passed auto companies began to shift the focus of owning automobiles from necessity to commodity. As more and more people were able to afford a car for multiple members of their family, as opposed to owning a single "family car" the auto makers responded to the increase in disposable income available for multiple car purchases by marketing their cars in association with certain images, known as branding. The auto manufacturers hoped to tap into Americans love of the open road and the freedom and mobility owning a car would give them. Soon convertibles were being advertised as a new sort of available freedom ("with the wind whipping through your hair, you could go anywhere, you were free..."). The American dream was also a popular advertising edge given to auto ads in the past, especially after World War II. Servicemen returned to America with a renewed patriotism and a newfound interest in the European sports car, which looked like nothing they had been previously offered by domestic car companies. The British MG, Alfa Romeo, Austin Healey, Porsche, and Triumph inspired American men with their small, fast, and modern looking two-seater designs (Saint's Car Club, 2003). It wasn't long before American auto companies including General Motors realized that there was a demand to be met in creating an all-American "sports car" (Minnesota's Premier Automotive Website, 2003). GM chose

Chevrolet as the brand to introduce American buyers to the sports car. Chevrolet's image was a stodgy one, and this new type of automobile was thought to help turn that image around. Harley J. Earl was hired in 1953 by Chevrolet to design new cars. Earl was inspired by the European design and vowed to bring what he loved about those cars to new Chevrolet models (Exotic Car Central Corvette History, 2003). The Corvette was the car that resulted from this influence. It was a quick, modern-looking two-seater that helped give the servicemen an American alternative in the sports car market. It was a car they could buy at home or aspire to buy in the future. Curiously, the recent patriotic attitudes present in the United States after the September 11th tragedy have shown a resurgence of automotive (and other product) ads which incorporate American patriotism. More specifically, the Corvette has again begun to market itself as the true American sports car (Autoweek, 2001).

### *Corvette History*

The first Chevrolet Corvette to hit the streets was the 1953 model. This classic design of white with red accents evoked a spirit that has not been compromised since. These early models introduced the country to European automotive styling (Adler, 1996). Chevrolet has only missed one year, 1983, when it didn't produce a Corvette model. General Motors has produced five generations of the Corvette to date (Leffingwell, 1997), with the next redesign slated for production in 2005. Through the years, the Corvette has been chosen four times to represent the Indianapolis 500 auto race and has developed a commemorative model for each occasion (in 1978, 1985, 1995, and 1998). Some models of the Corvette designed especially for the loyal consumer were the Collector Edition models produced in 1982 and 1996, the grand Sport model in 1996,

which was based on the 1963 racing Corvette and the Anniversary models made in 1978, 1988, 1993, and 2003 (celebrating the 50th year of the Corvette). For the performance concerned driver, the ZR-1 model Corvettes were produced in limited amount between 1990-1995 (ZR-1 Net, 2003). These were designed to be among the fastest production vehicles on the road at the time of their sale. The considerably higher price tag restricted this model to the elite Corvette enthusiast.

Arguably, the most beloved Corvette may be the fifth generation "C5" design sold between 1997 and the present (Schefter, 1998). General Motors has been experiencing internal company political problems and increasing pressure on profits in the 1980s and early 1990s (not to mention stiffer governmental automobile emissions regulations) which resulted in a slow Corvette sales period, comparatively. In 1997, the C5 was introduced at the Detroit International Auto Show to admiring audiences. General Motors used careful consideration in planning the introduction of the C5. By choosing an international event for the unveiling, members of the press from around the world were given a chance to see the car and at the same time experience the atmosphere surrounding the car with the general public, where the enthusiasm was undoubtedly contagious. The new design was far superior to previous models in almost all aspects. Consumers realized these advancements in performance and quality, and a new era of Corvette loyalty was born. Sales figures between January and May of 2001 show the C5 Corvette as the leader in sales among other two-seater sports cars in its class (Teahen, 2001). It should be mentioned that the C5 also played a major part in adding the younger generation of buyers to the Corvette family. Young people purchased the cars and joined the clubs, bringing the old and the young together in their love for the car.

To further invigorate Corvette enthusiasts, 2001 saw the introduction of the ultimate performance Corvette, the ZO6. This new model features power and engineering equivalent to no other Corvette ever produced. The 405 horsepower 2002 model secured the Corvette's place in auto racing, giving consumers yet another reason to get excited about this car. General Motors insiders have reported on a possible addition to the Corvette family, with the introduction of a \$100,000 high horsepower model that would be designed to compete with Aston-Martin, Ferrari, and Porsche. However, GM is being cautious with this decision because of fears that the Corvette brand may be weakened if this new model doesn't live up to (and ultimately exceed) customer expectations (Kranz, 2001).

#### *Trends in Automotive Advertising*

Recent trends in automotive advertising point to an emphasis on emotionally based ads, usage of alternative forms of media, an increasing number of event sponsorships, and an overall bigger budget. Whether the slowing economy will have a long term effect on advertising budgets is yet to be known, but there is evidence that many automakers have begun this season's promotional activities with a larger amount of money devoted to advertising than in the past. Audi of America planned to spend a company record-breaking \$25 million in the fourth quarter of last year to advertise their 2002 A4 sports sedan model to the public. This can be compared with the seemingly minimal \$16 million spent in the fourth quarter in 2000 (Halliday, 2001). The interesting aspect of Audi's ads is the fact that little or no attention is placed on the car's specific physical improvements. Instead, the Senior Vice President-Director of Client Services at Havas Advertising says that, "the ads focus on the experience of driving the car",

emphasizing the feelings encountered while behind the wheel of the Audi. Similarly, both BMW's 3-series ads and Mercedes C230 ads for the fourth quarter also demand a higher budget and appeal to the consumer's emotions about the car, rather than the car's specific characteristics. BMW has even gone so far as to hire famous filmmakers like Ang Lee and Guy Ritchie to develop short (around five minute) online films featuring their cars, but not focusing on them (Milvy, 2001). With budgets of around \$2 million each, the purpose of these "ads" is indeed to evoke an emotional response to the car, but in a more subtle way. The buzzword given to this modern mix of advertising and entertainment, "advertainment" seems to be a marketing tool gaining popularity.

The Corvette has shown up in unusual places recently as an alternative to common advertising practices. The Sycuan Casino and Resort in California began showcasing a 2002 Corvette as the grand prize to be won through playing one of their popular electronic games (PR Newswire, 2001). While a United States postage stamp seems to be unrelated to corporate advertising practice, one aftermarket Corvette parts manufacturer, Mid-America Designs, started a campaign in September of 2001 to petition for a commemorative Corvette stamp in hopes that it will be available when the car turns 50 in June of 2003. Seeing the Corvette's likeness on the top of a letter would be nothing but positive for the brand.

Online promotions are also becoming the norm in advertising plans, often linking advertising and entertainment. Chevrolet, New Line Cinema, and America Online teamed up last summer to run a cross-promotion between the three companies in association with the blockbuster movie, *Rush Hour 2*. The classic Corvette used in the movie was to be auctioned off to the highest bidder on America Online, with proceeds

going to charity. The companies hoped that movie fans would get excited about the car and log onto America Online to bid on it. This is not the first time New Line has organized an auction like this. In 1999, it auctioned a Corvette Stingray from *Austin Powers 2* collecting \$121,000 from the winning bidder (PR Newswire, 2001).

Company sponsorship of events not only gives the company direct access to their target advertising demographic, but also gets its name mentioned in association with the event. Sporting events are the most popular among automakers, although music festivals and concerts are gaining popularity. Ford decided to promote its compact sedan, the Focus, to the MTV generation by sponsoring the Detroit Electronic Music Festival in May of 2001 and tying the music to its "Detroit Techno" print ads. Volkswagen, a pioneer in auto advertising, had a popular musical tie-in last year in its DriversFest event (New York Times, 2001). Toyota, in hopes of attracting a younger audiences for its Camry model, has sponsored the MTV and VH1 Music Awards, launching a \$160 million media campaign utilizing TV, billboards, in-flight ads, and musical CDs. A \$1 CD featuring interviews with currently popular artists (and information on the car) was developed to interest younger car buyers (Eldridge, 2001).

Subaru may be the automaker most involved in sports sponsorship activity. The company's outdoors image has led it to seek affiliation with many rugged sporting events like the SCCA Pro Rally Racing Team. Subaru also holds the title of official car in more than 18 outdoor organizations like the National Ski Patrol, and International Mountain Biking Association (Bell, 2001).

The various types of advertising automakers are using to reach their audience is practically endless. Some forms are plain to see, others more subtle. Advertisers hope

that with the correct mix of advertising elements, consumers will take notice of their product.

### *Defining "Fandom"*

Corvette enthusiasts' loyal behavior can be related to a phenomenon known as fandom. According to Harris and Alexander, fans of various kinds have only come into the research spotlight recently. Most early research was descriptive in nature, mostly describing what fans do, rather than focusing on why they do it (Harris & Alexander, 1998). Harris and Alexander mention the difficulty in studying fandom because of the seemingly constant evolution of fans' practices and desires. Modern society encompasses groups that are loyal to just about anything (Burek, 1992), not to mention the groups formed from negative feelings (known as anti-loyalty groups) which are sometimes as motivated as those driven by positive feelings.

Studying the behaviors and attitudes of the Corvette community lends itself to fifty years of owners and loyalists. While many "fad" fan clubs come and go, the Corvette has etched its presence on the American cultural landscape since 1953. This long history should be enough to prove Corvette enthusiasts are dedicated and can sustain their loyalty, but still others see fans as nothing more than the word's full form, fanatics. The press is quick to jump on a story that tells of crazy obsessed fans who live and breathe their devotion. Jensen (1992), says that "the press...seems well invested in the idea of fandom as highly stigmatized, marked by danger, abnormality, and silliness." Corporations have begun to notice the opportunity these loyalists present to their marketing and advertising departments. Word of mouth is an under-appreciated method of advertising that fans participate in every day. Anthony Marsiglia (1994) writes, "fan



clubs go to the heart of a property's strength and build upon core strength, provide continuity and add much sought after "grapevine power," through important word of mouth advertising."

The interesting part of fandom and the formation of brand culture is that the fans themselves take what they want and leave what they want from a brand when showing their devotion to it. Laurence Vincent (2002) writes that brand cultures can be nurtured, but not controlled. A company can suggest uses for its product, but cannot force buyers to use its product in a certain way, or to think of its product in the way the company may have intended. He also says that brand culture owns the brand and what meaning it stands for, the company doesn't. Although the company may technically own the rights to the trademark, in the end the consumers build the community and mold the product into what it really stands for in the marketplace. Vincent uses the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang and its relationship to Harley-Davidson motorcycles in the 60's and 70's. With outlaw biker gangs riding on Harleys, the brand became known as an outlaw brand. The consumers turned it into what it is today. Harley-Davidson still has a bit of a reputation for being tough and rugged, possibly because of all the publicity tough and rugged people gave to their brand of motorcycle.

Researchers, as mentioned above, have just begun to recognize the need for studying why this fan phenomenon continues. Ang (1991) writes that, "academic researchers fall prey to the tendency to focus on objectifying exterior perspectives...which slight the insider's dimensions of...audiencehood." This quotation is referring to researchers focusing on information like consumer purchase data, buyer behavior, and other data related to actual purchases made. Ang notes that little research has been done

qualitatively to discover consumer motivations that lead to purchases, and taking into account interpersonal matters rather than simply using purchase data. In relation to the Corvette, purchase patterns may not always be directly related to loyalist behavior. A consumer who has owned only one Corvette can be as loyal or even more so than someone who buys a new model every year, for example.

In searching for explanations for loyalist behavior, some fans are easier to figure out than others, but most have some common characteristics. Jenkins notes, "what many...fans enjoy is the sense of creating their own cultures...which more perfectly express their own social visions and fantasies." Fans are motivated by self-invention, which is an opportunity to live in and through a set of symbols...rather than reality. This moves onto another fandom prerequisite, the acquiring of paraphernalia. A material culture is evident in most fan circles; a certain collection of physical objects is central to the admission, practice, and ritualized behavior associated with loyalty.

Membership within a sub-cultural community is an enticement for many fans. Group identities are formed around the enthusiasm in clubs, and common currencies are created. Slang term used to create dialogue become "in-words" that only club members know. In a way, an elitist context emerges, bringing with it a sense of exclusivity. Coulson and Sanders (1994) acknowledge that "fans, like many other human groups, like to know something others don't know, and to talk about it in in-group jargon." The author compares this to children playing in a tree house and requiring a password for admittance, and to adult fraternal organizations that partake in initiation rituals. For others, being in a fan club offers them the chance to be a big fish in a small pond. They can run for office and plan large activities, roles they may not play in society as a whole.

Geraghty (1991) explains the functionality of community when referring to women's enthusiasm towards soap operas and what benefits they gain by participating in online fan clubs based upon them. He says, "...such a process offers the feelings of community through the experience of shared pleasure." A group identity is constructed through ongoing communicative practices. Baym (2000) states, "being a member of an audience community...is about having a group of friends, a set of activities one does with those friends, and a world of relationships and feelings that grow from those friendships." She goes on to say, "we have far too little understanding of the spontaneous interpersonal interaction and social relations that make an audience a community, although these interactions are crucial to being a fan and incorporating mass media into our everyday lives."

What specifically is gained through fan club interaction? An informal poll was conducted to answer this question. The results varied from "my friends are in fandom" to "it is a better place to raise kids"(Coulson & Sanders, 1994). Many respondents commented that they could feel at ease among other enthusiasts, and that they didn't have to worry about their image or what others thought about them. Fans seem to judge other fans by their speech, writing, and actions; while appearance, career, and status in the world-at-large are less relevant. Overall, this researcher concluded that most members found long lasting friendships within the group they belonged to. It is also noted that there is no generation gap within many fan clubs. The enthusiasm shown by members overpowers differences in age.

Another important aspect of fandom to consider is how a parent's loyalty and enthusiasm can be passed along to his/her children, creating a new generation of fans.

Coulson and Sanders (1994) state that the average child being raised by highly involved parents begins to exhibit loyalist behavior around age nine. Since this research was first conducted in 1961, estimates gauge the present age to be five or under. While this book focuses on the science fiction fan community, the results of studies like this are interesting to note while keeping in mind that the Corvette community is approaching a time when second generation enthusiasts are becoming owners and members in clubs themselves. The book goes on to say that "the torch is being passed, and often (in the fan community)." An interesting quote given by one participant in the study, "I grew up in fandom. It just seems natural to stay in my parents' subculture."

### *Marketing Theories*

Some theories of marketing will likely be applied to the interviews conducted for this study. The first, constructed by Homans (1974), involves concepts of reward frequency, reward value, critical mass of rewards, reward-punishment discrepancy, stimuli similarity, and approving behavior. Approving behavior is the specific model that is of use to this discussion of consumer loyalty. According to his model, the greater the value of a reward received by a buyer, the stronger the approving behavior displayed. Of the Corvette owners being interviewed, many have owned more than one of the cars. This would mean that they were satisfied with the first one purchased (the reward they received was great) and were driven to purchase another one, and in some cases many more (the strong approving behavior displayed).

Another marketing model worth taking into account is the six types of social change table (Levy & Zaltman, 1975). This table uses time (long and short term) and societal levels (macro, micro, and intermediate) as dimensions to explain six types of

social change that corporations take into account when marketing their products. These include attitude and behavior change, normative and administrative change, invention/innovation and revolution, life-cycle change, organizational change, and sociocultural evolution. All of these are surely a part of General Motors's marketing plans in trying to make the Corvette appeal to the audience; however, the life-cycle change may be the most instrumental in marketing the Corvette to people like those being interviewed. This car has been around for a long time and some of the participants likely have been fans of the car since around the time of its creation. As the car itself evolved, the marketing had to evolve with it in order to keep its longstanding audience (people who are now in their 50s), while keeping the car appealing to younger buyers who are entering the sports car market.

Perhaps this is where the Corvette has greatly excelled, in keeping its original audience hooked on the image they first saw so many years ago, the American sports car of its youth, and using aspects of that feeling to showcase characteristics of the new models that are appealing to them in the present. Things like a comfortable ride, high quality, and superior handling. Corvette has been able to, at the same time, entice younger buyers with characteristics of the new Corvettes that they demand, like performance, high standards of engineering, and emerging technology.

Marketing pricing strategies cannot be overlooked when discussing automobiles. In the Corvette's early days, it was designed to be a direct competitor of the Ford Thunderbird. The strategy General Motors used to position the Corvette was largely based on pricing. Later, General Motors began marketing the Corvette as a competitor of the exotic import car, and with that change in class distinction, the price inevitably went

up. The car itself may or may not have significantly changed, but the image projected upon the car did, and a change in price often equates a change in quality and prestige, although this may or may not be true.

The buyer/seller relationship in business transactions also may play a part in the Corvette's success. The law of supply and demand, and more specifically, limited supply (as is often the case when the first Corvettes of the new model year become available and demand greatly exceeds supply) leads enthusiasts to go to extraordinary lengths to get the hotly sought after product. Levy and Zaltman found that these determined buyers who do succeed in obtaining the scarce item often receive preferential treatment after their purchase. Being the first one on the block (or in the club) to have the newest, difficult-to-obtain model is often cause for attention.

Some researchers have concluded that marketers tend to focus their product campaigns on eight "hidden needs" they feel consumers are looking to satisfy with the products they choose to purchase (Marchand, 1985). Five of the eight identified needs apply to this research: selling emotional security, assurance of worth, ego-gratification, a sense of power, and a sense of roots. Emotional security can be referred to in the most literal sense, as a consumer's decision to purchase a car gives her/her a dependable mode of transportation which is beneficial in both leisure activities and emergency situations. Reassurance of worth, ego-gratification, and a sense of power are all internal feelings that promote a person's self-esteem in relation to other people. A sense of roots refers to the "good old days" when times were better and we were younger.

Maslow, a famous researcher in the field of psychology, studied motivation and found that there is a distinct hierarchy of human needs that influence behavior (Huitt,

2002). There are two groupings to the theory: deficiency needs and growth needs. Within the deficiency needs, each lower need must be met before a person will act on trying to satisfy it once again. Maslow defines the deficiency needs as follows: physiological (hunger, thirst, etc.), safety/security, belongingness and love (including affiliation with others and the need to be accepted), and esteem (achievement, feelings of approval and recognition). The growth level of needs is only acted on if the deficiency needs are already met. The only growth need Maslow recognizes is self-actualization. This need is defined as realizing one's potential, being concerned about personal growth, being problem-focused, and appreciating life (Allegiance Telecomm, 2003).

Advertisers and marketers want their potential customers to feel good when they think about and use their product. This is why Maslow's hierarchy and the eight hidden needs mentioned above can be subtly incorporated into ads showing how a product can satisfy those needs, in turn making the customer happy. If everyone wants to feel appreciated and feel "part of the group," then a product that can do that is something the person may want to buy. However, the positive feelings companies try to promote need to be thought of in direct connection to the product itself. Advertisers need to construct ads that capture customers, making them feel as though the ad is talking only to them. According to Marchand, ads are living pictures that should accurately depict the current social condition of the times. Ads describe material artifacts available for purchase at a given time, and need to appeal convincingly to consumers (Marchand, 1985). This means that ads must present a picture of a life consumers either want to see themselves in, or can already identify with.

Perhaps all of the above mentioned marketing theories can be tied together by discussing priming effects. According to priming theory, media coverage of an issue (or object) is an indication of the salience of that issue (or object) in the media content (Pan & Kosnicki, 1997). Priming can be invoked simply by a news story devoting attention to an issue (or object) without advocating a position on it (Miller & Krosnik, 1997). In other words, simply being exposed to Corvette ads, a news feature on a Corvette club or show, or media related information on the car, whether positive or negative, can influence potential and current owners to think about and evaluate the car more easily and frequently. This is what marketers want to achieve, they want consumers to be aware of and thinking about their product whenever possible. The statement, “no publicity is bad publicity” applies here. Media priming is less concerned with how the object is treated in the media, and more about how often the object is presented in the media. The number of events and advertising/marketing efforts, along with the large network of Corvette owners keep the Corvette brand name in the minds of consumers.

### *Market Segmentation*

Lifestyle marketing is a term growing in popularity among advertisers. Hanan (1972) presents a working definition of this concept as a strategy for seizing the concept of a market according to its most meaningful, recurrent patterns of attitudes and activities, and then tailor-making...promotional strategies to fit these patterns. Although the concept of designing marketing efforts around specifically targeted consumers and their category of interests and lifestyle has been around at least since the early 1970s, this type of marketing has seen a recent resurgence. Perhaps the reason for this is the increasingly diverse demographics of previously homogenous areas. Marketers are now



segmenting their advertising messages to distinct audiences that share similar ethnic and racial backgrounds and geographic proximity, along with purchasing patterns and common interests.

Michman (1991) says that lifestyle and personality are two multidimensional ways of viewing consumer behavior that also allow for the consideration of factor interrelationships. Lifestyles are said to emerge from various social influences and an individual's personal value system. Therefore, marketers must carefully study their target market's needs, how they live, how they spend their money, and how they make purchase decisions to gain the knowledge needed to position products in the most successful way possible.

The Corvette's prime audience is the "mature" market, which will soon include the largest population segment (nearly 75 million Americans) known as the Baby Boomers. This age group (those born between 1946 and 1964) grew up with a set of experiences and future outlook unlike any generation before them. Menchin defines this age group as a generation united through shared experiences of the creation of television, great economic expectations along with feared war times, political unrest such as Vietnam, presidential assassinations, and Watergate. Menchin (1989) predicts that the Boomers will use their assets to enjoy an enriched, longer lifespan than those preceding them and will be very lucrative to companies promoting leisure, travel, and personal services. Nat Puccio, executive vice president and director of strategic planning at McCann-Erickson New York, has been quoted as saying, "the Baby Boomers are going to rewrite our theories on brand loyalty and older consumers"(Lipke, 2000).

Advertisers are beginning to realize that the mature consumer is a demographic in need of greater understanding. A fairly new advertising concept refers to target markets in terms of cognitive age rather than biological age. Today's mature consumers are living longer, and are healthier than their predecessors, as mentioned above. Sherman and Schiffman conducted empirical research that labels two distinct types of mature consumers: the Traditional and New Age elderly (it should be noted that the word "elderly", while typically used to describe the very oldest segment of the population, in this context encompasses the Baby Boomer generation who are only in their late 40s or 50s). This research team found that those labeled as New Age were almost twelve years younger than their biological age according to the study's variables (Schiffman & Sherman, 1991). New-Age types were also likely to feel that age is a state of mind and has little to do with chronological age. In addition, those fitting the New-Age label also have a considerable amount of disposable income. This is the segment of the mature market that the Corvette may appeal to the most.

On the opposite end of the demographic timeline are the most sought after age group: consumers age eighteen through thirty-four. This demographic is known to be easily persuaded to try a new brand or product. However, they have also been found to have flexible brand preferences, meaning they are often less loyal to products than other age groups. Marketers want to reach this group with positive product messages in anticipation of a loyal lifelong customer. According to George Moschis, director of the Center for Mature Consumer Studies at Georgia State University, it can be five times as expensive for a company to attract a new customer than it is to retain old ones. Corvette has realized this by designing ads that appeal to its core group of enthusiasts, but at the

same time presenting their brand to a younger future car buyer by participating in non-traditional promotions like the movie tie-ins mentioned earlier.

### *Brand Loyalty*

The ultimate goal companies want to achieve by reaching young audiences while they are still forming opinions about products are feelings of brand loyalty. Building upon Moschis's estimate on how expensive it is to attract a new customer rather than retaining old ones, Light (1991) has been quoted as saying that a brand-loyal customer may be nine times as profitable as a non-loyal one. This study on Corvette enthusiasts is a prime example of loyal consumer behavior. Companies depend on loyal customers to guarantee repeat business, to participate in word-of-mouth advertising, and to be a part of enthusiast groups that further the product's image and reputation to outside communities. In this context, brand loyalty can be defined according to Jacoby's (1971) working definition, "the biased (non-random) behavioral response (purchase) expressed over time by some decision-making unit with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of brands and is a function of psychological processes."

In order for a brand to develop loyal customers, it must possess certain key values that make people want to purchase it and not its competitors. Nilson (1998) states that successful brands are built on a combination of product benefits (tangible values), emotion (abstract values), and character (intangible values). It is the combination which is important, the mix between the three elements. Many past studies in brand loyalty have yielded limited results because of the general focus on measuring loyalty solely by purchasing decision, without taking into account the other important dimensions involved. Ha (1998) describes her theory of brand loyalty as a combination of cognitive

response, subjective norm and purchase behavior. Regardless of the numerous theories of measuring brand loyalty, most scholars agree that the concept of brand loyalty is multifaceted and needs to be studied as such.

Vincent (2002) writes that marketing a so-called legendary brand (such as the Chevrolet Corvette) takes a more complex effort than attending to a non-legendary brand. Vincent describes a legendary brand as a brand that has a story to tell, a set of values associated with it that consumers identify with. The brand has a soul.

Often a person's personal narrative coincides with the mythology of a certain brand, leading him/her to seek out this brand for purchase in order to reaffirm a self-concept and relay an image to others. Greater detail will be given to the issue of self-concept later.

The bottom line, according to Vincent, is that a legendary brand must have its own brand narrative, just as people have personal narratives. When consumers think about a legendary brand, they envision a context, a background story. For non-legendary brands, consumers may recall specific ads or product attributes, but no emotional response will take place.

Another applicable study relating to brand loyalty of a similar dimension to the Corvette enthusiasts is research conducted by Bristow and Sebastian (2001). This study involves primary research of the loyalty behavior exhibited by Chicago Cubs baseball fans. They found that loyal Cubs fans were likely to have been fans as children, were likely to attend more games than the average Cubs fan, were more likely to purchase Cubs merchandise, and were more knowledgeable about the game of baseball than less loyal fans. Descriptions similar to these may be applied to Corvette's loyal consumers also.

## *Advertising Theories*

A popular assumption about advertising and marketing messages is that they are capable of altering consumers' attitudes toward a product. Though there more than four hundred and fifty known theories published on how advertising works (Broadbent, 1992), the AIDA advertising effects model (Joyce, 1967; Financial Times, 2003) is the standard for describing advertising's consumer influence. This model simply states that through the stages of awareness, interest, desire, and action, a consumer decides to purchase a certain product over another. It implies that consumers must have an awareness of a product in order to develop a desire for it, and ads can affect consumer attitudes toward a brand, leading to an eventual purchase. Miller and Berry (1998) use an eleven year tracking study to present an alternative view on advertising's influence. The authors argue that ads are more likely to improve a product's brand salience (the order in which brands are recalled in a consumer's mind prior to making a purchase, also known as the consideration set) than to alter brand attitudes. This is not necessarily negative for advertisers. Brand salience influences sales because products that appear in a buyer's consideration set are more likely to be purchased than those that aren't present.

In consulting attitude-behavior consistency theories found in psychology literature, researchers have found that attitudes are not as closely related to overt behavior as previously thought (Wicker, 1969). Consumer attitudes and their resulting brand purchase choices were studied by researchers Day and Deutscher (1982), where attitudes were also not shown to be strongly predictive of brand choices in every context. It seems as though consumer attitudes may not play as large of a part in consumer behavior as previously thought. However, consumer attitudes do have a certain amount of power in

the promotion of a product. Word-of-mouth marketing is an underrated form of promotion that is described as an exchange of thoughts, ideas, or comments between two or more consumers, none of whom are a marketing source (Bone, 2002). A survey that asked consumers of sixty different products how they came to purchase what they did found that referrals from others accounted for three times as many purchases as did advertising (Morin, 1983). Herr, Kordes, and Kim (1991) go so far as to say that a single positive word-of-mouth communication can result in the formation of favorable attitudes towards a brand.

Trout (2000) says that in order for a brand to survive in the marketplace in this time of intense competition, it must differentiate itself from all other brands. This is the only way to make that favorable first opinion, to start the chain of word of mouth recommendations. He says that even commodities like milk and soap must find at least one way that they are different (and better) than their competitors. Trout stresses that unless a brand is first in the marketplace, creating a new unique product category for itself, the only way to survive is differentiation. Using the Corvette as an example, the car itself may be similar in technological advancements and performance to other sports cars in its class, but by using the American-made difference and establishing a Corvette community angle, it allows this car to stand out from its competition.

While companies do need to differentiate their products from their competitors' products, they must be careful not to differentiate too much among their own brand of products. Reis and Reis (1998) feel that the over-extension of a brand can be detrimental to the brand as a whole, and to the core product the brand once solely represented. In their book they say that if a company has a prestigious product, it shouldn't try to be

everything to everyone by introducing a cheaper, less prestigious version (similar to what Cadillac did in the 1980s by developing the Cimmaron, a less prestigious offering of the Cadillac brand). The same rule applies to the opposite situation, brands known for being economical shouldn't try to appeal to consumers in the market for high cost luxury products. The authors feel that by over extending a brand, the brand is cheapened, and the original product the company has is devalued. They also add that brands should be known for one thing, and companies should stick to what they know. The Corvette has done a good job of keeping the brand valuable by only offering one to two different models per year, and usually the extra offerings are a more expensive, value-added product like the Collector Edition models, or the improved performance ZO6 model. In years past there had been rumors of a four-door Corvette being developed for the consumer interested in both sport and practicality. Luckily, this version of the car never came to be. If it had, there would be a strong chance that the Corvette brand would eventually lose some of its value and brand mythology as a high end performance sports car.

A perceived mistake like introducing a four-door model of the Corvette, a brand that is synonymous with two-door, two-seater sports cars, would seemingly hurt even a legendary brand like the Chevrolet Corvette. Trout explains that many large corporations that own legendary brands often take their market position for granted, assuming they will always be on top, and if they were to make a bad decision consumers would forgive them quicker than companies not in their position. According to Trout, not always. He sites the example of the introduction of "New Coke," which ultimately failed very quickly after it was launched. Consumers make brands legendary because of their

connection to the brand. If that connection is severed, or if the consumers feel betrayed or deceived, they won't waste any time switching to a brand that treats them better. Trout (2000) goes on to tell about the kind of deception that companies often try to launch new products. Companies underestimate consumers and think they will buy anything with the legendary brand's name on it. Besides devaluing the brand, as mentioned earlier, Trout says that consumers tend to feel as though they are being tricked when companies try to sell items they have no experience selling just because their brand name is on it. Would anyone buy a television made by Kellogg's? Would anyone buy cereal made by Sony? Of course not. This is the point Trout is making. He explains that even if a brand extension may be profitable in the short term, it will inevitably turn out to be negative in the long term. He reinforces the suggestion for companies to stick to what they know.

*Social identity, self-concept and product attachment*

People are social beings, and as such they tend to take others' thoughts into account when making their own purchase decisions. They trust those around them more than a company trying to sell them a product for its own profit. Often purchases are made for reasons other than those a company overtly advertises. Rather than buying an item solely for its physical attributes, sometimes people decide to purchase products because of how they make them feel, or how they believe owning a certain item will portray them to others. Products can take on a personality of their own (brand personality is defined as human characteristics being associated with a brand), helping the owner to associate him/herself with a certain image or emotion. According to Komter (2001), creation of product meaning can be traced back in history to many non-Western societies where inanimate objects were believed to have their own spirit. Objects were often



worshipped as a representation of a higher meaning. While this may be an extreme comparison, it shows that emotions can be connected to objects because of what they represent to the person, whether it be worshipping a statue or being a loyal car enthusiast.

The endowment effect is a theory worth mentioning because it can be directly applied to loyal Corvette owners. The premise is that the history of past ownership, in addition to present ownership, can affect the valuation of an object. After conducting four studies on this theory, Strahilevitz and Loewenstein (1998) found that the longer someone owns a product, the more value her/she places on it, and the longer it has been owned in the past, the more value they place on it in the present. Through field studies Johnson (1993) has shown that people become attached to an object to some degree almost instantly upon being endowed with it.

Material goods possess both social and cultural meaning. They are a way to define who we are to ourselves and others (Carrier, 1995). There is no inherent meaning to an object; human relationships give them their meaning. Researchers such as Bourdieu (1984) link the purchase of certain products to the reinforcement of a social class system. He says, “people distinguish themselves from each other by adopting a certain lifestyle in which certain things or goods function as markers of their aspired status. Acts of consumption reproduce social difference because the consumption of some goods is considered a sign of distinction while the consumption of others signifies a lack of distinction.” For the purpose of this study on Corvette enthusiasts, factors regarding individual social identity and their relation to purchase choices will be emphasized over societal level class implications. However, it is important to note that material goods are linked to class structure.

Social identity and an individual's self-concept (how we think of ourselves) factor into their purchase decisions. Brand personality is often used to express one's own image (Fournier, 1998). People seek out products that reinforce the image they want to show others. Social identification relates to a person's belonging to a group or organization and also is taken into account when purchasing products (Bhattacharya et.al, 1995). Organization membership gives people a reference group to base decisions on, weighing factors like peer acceptance.

Despite the fact that the American perception of self is grounded in our very individualistic culture, participation in organizations is a popular venue to try out values and interests in order to "find ourselves" through interacting with others. According to Tharp (2001), it is an irony of American individualism that without the reference point of the groups we identify with or belong to, our self remains incomplete and undefined. Our country functions differently in modern times than it did in the past, judging by the way our identities are chosen rather than given to us. We are no longer born into a tribe where we must embody certain standards and practices of our ancestors. Rather, we are free to associate with whomever we choose and act in any way we wish, within reason.

Social identity theory states that in addition to a personal identity, the self-concept (which is dynamic, and therefore can be modified) is also composed of a social identity (the term "self" represents the totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings that have reference to him or herself as an object of thought), (Rosenberg, 1979). Group classifications can be based on any number of categories such as demographics, ethnicity, or interests. Turner (1982) suggests that classification enables people to order their social environment and locate themselves and others within it.

It is the organizational identification as related to an individual's social identity and self-concept that interests this study. Consumption is critical in identity formation and identity reinforcement. Social theories by Beck, Giddens, and Bauman agree that people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others by the goods and practices they possess and display (Warde, 1994). In brief, here are the main ideas of each theory; Beck (1992) claims that "individuals become the agents of their own livelihood mediated by the market, and individualism means market dependency in all dimensions of living." He feels that people must use the marketplace to act out their idea of identity and individuality. Giddens (1991) finds that maintaining self identity in modern times is increasingly difficult. Small decisions people make every day (what to wear, who to go out with after work) represent not only how to act, but who to be. He says, "the project of the self becomes translated into one of possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life." Bauman (1988) gives a more positive argument by saying that commodities are markers of identity and are judged for their symbolic significance. By giving this power to material goods, people receive the greatest freedom; they can construct their own "self." However, Bauman does note that this can have a negative effect when consumers feel that their only road to certainty is in consumption.

## Methodology

Qualitative research methods were developed in the social sciences to allow researchers to study social and cultural issues. The qualitative methods used in this paper are known as case study research and ethnographic research. Qualitative data sources include participant observation, and in-depth interviews, along with the researcher's own impressions and reactions.

Researchers often choose to conduct qualitative research rather than quantitative research because they feel that qualitative methods allow a deeper understanding of people and the social and cultural contexts they live in. According to Kaplan and Maxwell (1994), the goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants and their particular social and institutional context is largely lost when textual data are quantified.

Ethnographic research comes from the discipline of social and cultural anthropology and requires the researcher to spend a significant amount of time "in the field." Ethnographers immerse themselves in the lives of the people they study in order to place the phenomena they observe in the correct social and cultural context (Lewis, 1985). The best way to accurately understand a situation is to be a part of it.

Case study research is a commonly used qualitative method which allows the researcher much flexibility (Orlickowski & Baroudi, 1991). Although there are numerous definitions, Yin (1994) defines the scope of a case study as, "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the

boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." The term "case study" can also be used to describe a unit of measurement, a study focused on one specific phenomena. The Cornell University Research Methods Knowledge Base defines a case study as "an intensive study of a specific individual or specific context" (Trochim, 2002).

The participant observation research method was also originally developed in the field of anthropology, but has since become accepted in other disciplines as well. The participant observer method derives from a belief that a community's values, dynamics, internal relationships, structures, and conflicts are understood best from their observed actions, rather than from their normative statements of what "is". The participant observer attempts immersion, to the extent permitted, in local life in order to understand and document how things work (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2002).

It should be mentioned that there are some common drawbacks associated with being the participant observer. Objectivity is sometimes compromised when the researcher becomes a part of an outside community to the point that he/she may be unable to remain unbiased in reporting. Personal relationships with those being studied often develop, making documentation difficult, in trying to preserve privacy.

In-depth interviewing entails asking questions, listening to the answers, and then posing additional questions to clarify or expand on a particular issue. Questions are open-ended and participants are encouraged to express their own perceptions in their own words. The interview may sound more like a conversation than a typical interview. In-depth interviewing aims at gaining a deep understanding of the participant's feelings and

beliefs. The interviews are usually done one on one and in person. Often the conversation is audiotaped for future reference by the researcher (World Bank Group Qualitative Methods, 2002).

Grounded theory is a research method that seeks to develop theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. According to Martin and Turner (1986), grounded theory is "an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data." The major difference between grounded theory and other methods is its specific approach to theory development; grounded theory suggests that there should be a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis.

This qualitative study will examine the characteristics of social groups which lead to consumer loyalty and enthusiasm for a specific product: the Chevrolet Corvette. This will be accomplished by using the above mentioned articles as a basis for a case study. Corvette enthusiasts were interviewed and asked to elaborate on a set of questions (see Appendix A) involving their feelings about the car community, and how their involvement in car clubs or other related groups has enriched their lives beyond the scope of the car itself. Further research consisted of participant observation taking place at Corvette events where enthusiasts were in attendance. These events are as follows: The 2002 Corvette Labor Day Celebration which took place at the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky where Corvette owners from all over the world spent the weekend participating in seminars, showing their cars in shows, driving in road rallies, and racing their cars. A National Corvette Museum tour was also taken. Two seminars

were attended, one given by the previous (now retired) chief engineer of the Corvette, the other a General Motors Vice President and member of the National Corvette Museum Hall of Fame. A private tour of the Corvette assembly plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky was taken. A club meeting of America's Corvette Club, based in West Bloomfield, Michigan was attended. Baker's Cruise Night, the largest weekly classic car gathering in the Midwest, where Corvette owners interact with each other and other car enthusiasts was experienced. The 2002 Woodward Dream Cruise which took place throughout six cities in metropolitan Detroit, and is the largest one-day car enthusiast event in the world was attended. Attending these events allowed consideration to be placed on what participants say (all interviews were audio taped and transcribed for use in this research) and what they are observed doing. They also provided the researcher with anecdotal information to better understand interview comments and the context in which they are given.

In-depth interviews were conducted with approximately thirty people, some are Corvette owners and some are people who work with the brand. The participants were chosen using a convenience sampling process. Some Corvette owners were selected by referring to club rosters, and by using the help of acquaintances and participant referrals. They were then contacted by e-mail in order to decide on a time and place to conduct the interview. Other owners were approached at the above mentioned events and asked to participate. All interviews were one-on-one, some taking place at participants' homes, others in public meeting places. All interviews were audio taped with the permission of the participants. Those interviewed were males and females of various ages who have been involved with Corvettes from two to nearly thirty years. Some being interviewed

are members of clubs and find the Corvette to be a favorite pass time or hobby, others have taken an active role in starting their own clubs. Some are enthusiasts who are involved with the internal Corvette structure, working for General Motors or Corvette related companies. The participants were asked open-ended questions relating to their feelings about the image of the Corvette along with questions asking them to identify specific Corvette memories, to talk about their involvement with the car, and to explain what their clubs and/or other Corvette experiences contribute to their lives (see Appendix A).

Additionally, Corvette executives were chosen by their how their job responsibilities relate to the study. They were contacted by e-mail and asked to make an appointment for a meeting. All executives have been contacted personally, not through phone calls to their companies.

Some key questions include; How would you describe the image of the Corvette? What were you expecting to gain from club membership? What is your first Corvette memory? How would you describe the Corvette community? In addition, demographic questions were also asked, and direct inquiries about what clubs they belong to, how many Corvettes they have owned, and in what other ways this car is important to them. Direct quotations taken from the in-depth interviews will be identified in the next section using a random numbering system that assigns each interview a number, and also gives each interview a letter (“O” for owner and “E” for executive) in order to organize the responses.

It is expected that those with a long history with the brand will provide interesting, fruitful information pertaining to how various factors influence them in



remaining loyal to the car and to the clubs for so many years. Those who are newer to club membership and car ownership can share another perspective on being motivated to join the community fairly recently. Using the perspectives of many different people will be beneficial in gaining a broad base of information. The differences in how those interviewed incorporate the car into their everyday lives (whether it be working with the brand, organizing club events, or attending a car show on the weekends) each person can share valuable insight into the role this car plays in his/her life and why he/she is loyal to it.

This study focuses on the following:

1. Individual Corvette owners and executives involved with the brand.
2. People involved are representative of a certain type of fan culture.
3. This research will examine how “fandom” works; what causes it and what reinforces it.

Using grounded theory, the information gathered from interviews was analyzed by selective coding in order to make comparisons within the data taken from the owner and executive interviews. Selective coding is defined as the process of integrating and refining categories. Overarching themes with several sub-categorized themes were constructed. Concepts that reach the status of a category are abstractions; they represent not one individual's or group's story but rather the stories of many persons or groups reduced into, and represented by, several highly conceptual terms (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data gathered was analyzed sentence by sentence in order to understand the meaning and context behind the responses given by participants. The wording and phrasing of the responses was taken into consideration while developing themes and

categories. When the participant emphasized a particular topic, it showed that they wanted to get a certain point across and that this topic was important to them. However, topics that were only casually mentioned also proved to be important because the response reflected something an owner or executive was thinking about, but that they may not have recognized as being important. Every comment and response was analyzed in order to construct the themes and categories presented in the next section.

Comments specifically related to brand loyalty and the factors contributing to and reinforcing that loyalty were analyzed very closely. Owners and executives spoke about their participation in Corvette events, how active they were within their local clubs, and how much Corvette paraphernalia they purchase, all of which are factors that help show a level of brand loyalty. Many of the questions asked of the participants were designed to uncover their level of loyalty. By inquiring about participants' feelings on the label "America's sports car," how they seek out product and community information, why and under what circumstances they chose to join a club, and how their loyalty is shown all contribute to a better understanding of how they show their loyalty and to what extent. A working theory pertaining to the research concepts outlined above has emerged.

## Results

In-depth interviews with Corvette owners provided a wide variety of data, most of which can be categorized by the following themes: social interaction, Corvette image, and media and information gathering. In this context, social interaction can be described as participating in community events, having social relationships with other members of the community, and experiencing positive feelings associated with the camaraderie, attention, and approval given to an individual from others involved in the Corvette network. The Corvette image theme refers to the physical car and what the brand abstractly stands for in the minds of the owners. Media and information gathering is how pertinent information about the car and the events involving the car get out to the public. These owner themes represent overarching categories that include various sub-categories.

### Social interaction sub-categories:

- Pride, prestige, car as reward, freedom
- Loyalty and emotional connection
- Corvette community and community involvement
- Wealth, class, value
- Owner demographics

### Corvette image sub-categories:

- Car attributes
- History, Corvette in relation to life events
- American tradition, quality

The social interaction and Corvette image themes can be linked through media and information gathering. The image of the car and its accompanying subsets have more to

do with formal advertising and marketing efforts made by the company, tradition provided by the brand and its design and engineering decisions, physical characteristics of the car, and other tangible elements that make the Corvette so important to these owners. Social interaction is more abstract, in that this category and its subsets refer to the community that has been established for owners to meet each other, converse with other owners about their cars, attend events, travel, join clubs, and also to display their loyalty to the brand and to identify their feelings of pride in relation to their cars. The way owning and driving the car makes these people feel, and how they believe they are portrayed to others simply by being associated with the car are important elements within this theme.

In speaking with Corvette executives, many of the same themes that arose in the owner interviews were also identified in the executive interviews. It was important to get the perspective of the people that construct the physical car that all of this loyalty is surrounding. Some executives were also Corvette owners, but each was asked questions pertaining to their job and not to their potential owner enthusiasm. Information gathered from these professionals varied in that each executive is an expert in their given position within the Corvette brand, making each interview more in-depth on a certain part of the Corvette creation and management process. Even so, the overarching themes of Corvette image, social interaction and media and information distribution were identified. Regarding the executives, Corvette image can be defined as the abstract feelings the executives wish to evoke in the potential customer by designing and engineering the car in a particular way. The social interaction theme refers to the executives' interpersonal experiences with owners, their participation at events, and also how they intend to create a vehicle that owners feel so passionately about. Media and information gathering is

referring to information getting disseminated from the company to the public. Each theme also includes various sub-categories.

Corvette image sub-categories:

-Car attributes

-History

-American tradition, quality

Social interaction sub-categories:

-Pride, prestige, loyal behavior

-Corvette community, demographics of enthusiasts

While the owners experience the interpersonal relations theme every time they drive their car, receive a compliment, attend a show or go to a club meeting, the executives live the Corvette image theme on a daily basis. It is their job to design, market, and engineer this car to keep it the object of enthusiasm for the owners. The two executive themes mentioned can be linked through media and information distribution. The executives make the product then they must distribute the information to the Corvette community (where the enthusiasts are eager to gather this information), and to the public as a whole. The social interactions result from the Corvette image, which is linked through the media and the exchange of information.

## *Owner themes*

### *Social interaction*

This became an overarching theme because it related to a lot of the topics Corvette owners spoke passionately about. A major part of most responses relating to the car and what it does for them and how it enriches their lives focused on relationships built with other owners, and the activities they do together. When participants were asked about club membership and what they expected to gain from being a member, and what they actually did gain, more often than not, owners said the most important reason to join and stay in a club was for the personal friendships and contact with other owners. This was emphasized above other reasons like obtaining technical information about the car, racing, looking at show cars, and other specifically car-related activities. The camaraderie between owners was apparent at the events that were attended for this project. People reconnected with each other after they had met at previous Corvette events. The Corvette community spans the entire country, and most of the events attended were large enough to attract people from thousands of miles away. As an outsider looking in, these national events could have been mistaken for local club events, the way people knew each other and kept track of who did what to their car since the last event. It is a tight-knit community. In observing owners interacting with each other, I witnessed a respect and admiration that these enthusiasts felt towards each other. These feelings can be shown to others through the “Corvette wave,” a gesture owners give to each other when they see another Corvette driving down the road. Everyone gets the wave, you don’t need to be a part of any club to receive this anonymous gesture of the common bond every owner shares.

“(The biggest gain from club membership was) the opportunity to meet a large number of people with similar interests, the majority of which I consider friends. A few of which are close friends.” (O-14)

“We have got friends that we met back in the 1970’s that still come out to visit us now, even more than family does, they come from all over the country and it is really nice.” (O-4)

“I enjoy my Corvette for the opportunities to meet people it provides me.” (O-14)

“I have made thousands of friends around the world and done and seen a lot of cool stuff because of my involvement in the hobby.” (O-13)

“We have met most of our very best friends due to owning a Corvette and the associated lifestyle.” (O-10)

“The car brings us together for some good times and friendship” (O-16)

*Pride, prestige, Corvette as reward, freedom.* The most apparent sub-category that arose from the owner interviews was by far the theme that included pride and prestige. These feelings are an important part of owning a Corvette. Some owners do say that they are indifferent about whether or not others like or appreciate their cars, they bought them for themselves and no one else. However, comments like these were the exception, not the rule. Most owners admitted liking the feelings they got when others admired their car. Most owners also said that they are proud to own a Corvette, they feel like their car is a reward for their hard work and success in life, and that driving their Corvette feels like nothing else they have experienced, it makes them feel free and exhilarated.

“I enjoy my Corvettes for the recognition they provide me. Everyone has an ego and my Corvette feeds mine.”(O-14)

“I feel very special and full of pride (when someone compliments my car) since I have taken great care in choosing and maintaining my Corvettes.” (O-17)

“I could get in the Corvette when I’m feeling low, go for a ride and have a total mood change. It lifts your spirits, people wave. It’s a lifestyle, not a car.” (O-18)

“I feel like a proud parent (when someone compliments my car).” (O-19)

“I still smile whenever I look at the car. I feel lucky to own one.” (O-20)

“(When I drive my Corvette) I feel like a little kid with a new toy. Like a king, an astronaut.” (O-16)

“(When driving my Corvette) the cares of the world melt away. Man and machine in oneness with the road, throw me a curve and let me sail through it.” (O-18)

*Loyalty and emotional connection.* Displays of loyal behavior are an integral part of this study. Corvette enthusiasts are unofficially known as some of the most loyal car owners around. In speaking with owners for this study, it seems as though this is true. Corvette owners explained the feelings that attach them to their cars, some even think of their cars as parts of their family, another child, or even taking on feelings felt for a pet. Many describe the day they sold one of their Corvettes with a tear coming to their eyes, referring to the sale of the Corvette as “the one that got away.” Owners conveyed their loyalty not only to the brand Corvette, but also to certain years and body styles of the car. Some owners feel that certain engineers in General Motors history made superior decisions about the Corvette and they feel a certain loyalty to them for making the car of their dreams what it is today. The engineers spoken about were Zora Arkus-Duntov, the Corvette chief engineer from 1954-1974 and Dave Hill, current Corvette chief engineer and a participant in this study.



Others describe themselves as being loyal to a certain Corvette mindset, either in appreciating the beauty of a restored, stock Corvette with all original parts, or as an “individualist”, someone who feels that Corvettes need to be customized to reflect the unique tastes of their owners. This is done by adding after market upgrades or cosmetic touches to the car, which many “traditionalists” wouldn’t prefer to have. Although owners may disagree on the best way to present their cars, they can all agree on one thing, they love the Corvette and show their loyalty by purchasing various types of paraphernalia and by displaying their love for the Corvette in whatever way possible.

“Corvette is my life, pure and simple. I am either working at my day job or doing something Corvette hobby related 100% of my time.” (O-13)

“(Corvette is a part of my everyday life), it is the focus of friends, vacations, dress and entertainment.” (O-10)

“I took a photo when I turned in (my ’99 Corvette) and a tear rolled down.” (O-18)

“I refer to (my Corvettes as) baby number 2 and 3, my wife is my little baby number 1, and I really look forward to taking a drive in (my Corvettes) much like a pet owner plays with his dog.” (O-17)

“Most Corvette people are very, very loyal to not only Corvette, they are also loyal to their particular brands of Corvettes, whether it be the year, (or being loyal to keeping their cars stock or modifying them).” (O-1)

“I waited 44 years to buy the Corvette I have. It is now part of my life. It has brought new friends and an escape from stress and almost as much happiness as my wife and kids bring me.” (O-16)

*Corvette community and community involvement.* The Chevrolet Corvette is different from most other automobiles because of the community that has developed around owning the car. Loyal owners have started their own clubs in honor of the Corvette, as opposed to other car clubs created by the company that makes a particular car.

Saturn, for example has an owners group that was developed by the company itself to give owners a way to meet each other and to further promote the “family” feeling of owning a Saturn. The Corvette community is different because it was established by the owners themselves. Some participants in this study are founders of Corvette clubs in their areas. Many others hold offices in their clubs or regularly volunteer at the National Corvette Museum, or at their local club events. One participant started an online-based club specifically for the newest generation of Corvettes, the “C5”, and since 1997 this club has grown to over 6,000 members nationwide. While not all participants are members of clubs, all agreed that they thought of themselves as part of the Corvette community regardless of whether they were officially part of a Corvette organization. To them, simply owning the car makes them a part of the Corvette family.

The term “Corvette people” came up in many interviews when participants were describing the Corvette community. These Corvette owners feel that other owners are usually similar to themselves in ways such as; sharing common values and ideals, having similar tastes outside of Corvette fandom, sharing a similar socioeconomic background, and having achieved a similar level of success in life. “Corvette people are people just like me,” is what many said. They can be described as people that can be counted on, people that are honest, friendly, and genuine.

“Corvette owners are similar to me in age, ideals, (they are usually) clean freaks, and of a high business status (upper management).”  
(O-16)

“The people make the car, the car doesn’t make the people.”  
(O-16)

“Most Corvette owners are older people (40-50), most are friendly, enjoy life, travel, and the good things.” (O-18)

“It would not be an exaggeration to say that I have spent a minimum of 50 hours per month on Corvette club business.” (O-14)

“The Corvette community fills an important need to feel connected to the bigger picture.” (O-18)

“No other cars have a following as dedicated as the Corvette.” (O-4)

“Other Corvette owners are similar to myself in that we all love this car and want to look at them, drive them, polish them, and hang out with other Corvette owners. We get it!” (O-13)

*Wealth and class.* The word “success” came up very often in the owner interviews. Many participants felt that by owning a Corvette, they were portrayed to others as being a successful person. Owners often described the Corvette itself as being a mark of success. Some used the word “successful” to describe how they felt buying their first Corvette, they used the word to convey a more internal feeling that they had reached their professional goals and the car was an outward example of that. The Corvette is not an inexpensive car to own. Older models command prices based on their condition and new 2003 models run from about \$45,000 to \$56,000. A certain element of wealth must be achieved in order to afford this car in most cases. This makes the Corvette community a blend of gender and ethnic groups, but similar socioeconomic backgrounds among owners. Some participants mentioned the fact that blue collar workers can afford a car like the Corvette, while other sports cars in its class (Porsche, Viper) are only affordable to the very upper class person. Most owners think of the Corvette as a mark of excellence, a car that impresses others and reaffirms the owners’ feelings of success, and makes them stand out from the crowd by owning something really special.

“(Owning a Corvette portrays me to others as) someone that has accomplished goals in life and career that allows me to own this special car.” (O-17)

“Some think Corvette owners are rich- we aren’t- we’re broke because all our money goes into (the car)! Most folks are impressed and think you are successful, daring, cool and independent (if you own a Corvette).” (O-13)

“(Corvette owners are similar to me in that) they have achieved a level of success and appreciate the finer things.” (O-10)

“(Owning a Corvette makes other see me as) being youthful, modern-thinking, and successful to some degree.” (O-14)

*Owner demographics.* The mindset and backgrounds of Corvette owners is a major focus of this study. How they came to choose the Corvette over other cars, why they decide to participate in the events and activities that go along with their car, and what keeps them loyal to the brand are questions of interest. There is a certain type of “Corvette person” according to many of those interviewed. Generally, Corvette owners are older, usually in their 40s or 50s, with grown children, they possess a good amount of disposable income and they are often retired. The participants in this study represent many different demographic groups varied by age, gender, ethnicity, and location. Some are owners of one Corvette, others own up to five. A few have recently joined the Corvette family, some have been a part of it for up to thirty years. The most important information that came up regarding the demographics of Corvette owners is that most of the people interviewed found other owners to be just like them.

“A good percentage of Corvette owners are older, empty nesters with enough extra money to afford the car. However, there are other sectors that differ greatly (young racers, affluent 30-40 year olds, etc.)” (O-17)

“(People take an interest in the Corvette) prior to starting a family and again after the kids are grown.” (O-10)

“(Corvette owners) are from diverse backgrounds and cultures.” (O-11)

“(Most Corvette owners) are older and hence more able to afford the car and enjoy the V8 power and great styling.” (O-12)

“I think most (current) Corvette owners are past Corvette owners, trying to bring back the past. Some are trying to catch up with something they missed in the past.” (O-9)

### *Corvette image*

The image of the Corvette in the minds of the enthusiasts is the second overarching theme identified from the interviews. The image of the car is what the owners want to buy into, they either want to be a part of the image portrayed by the car, or they already see themselves as being consistent with the image the Corvette conveys. Some owners, as mentioned above, say that they have little or no concern about what image the car they own has. They like the car and have purchased it for their own enjoyment, not to be associated with an image. Others admit that they like what the Corvette stands for, and feel that their personal successes allow them to be a part of this image and owning the car reinforces that. Participants described the Corvette’s unique image as many different things including sophistication, unique design, luxury, engineering excellence, performance and an American tradition of quality. The car’s physical characteristics play a large part in its overall image, along with past and current advertising and promotions, the history of the brand (now in its 50<sup>th</sup> year), and its unofficial title of “America’s sports car”.

“The Corvette is a truly world-class automobile that has 50 years of history that comes with it wherever you go.” (O-14)

“I would describe the image of the Corvette as classic.” (O-4)

“Corvette has the same type of image as the Harley-Davidson motorcycle has. Something you aspire to own, and represents all that is good and fun about America and the freedoms we have.” (O-13)

“The Corvette is the car that ultimately everyone wants to have!” (O-11)

“The image is youth, adventure, on the edge.” (O-14)

“The Corvette is a special breed.” (O-15)

“From the age of five on up, I’d guess that 90% of the people on the street can identify (a Corvette).” (O-14)

“Corvettes always had a mystique to them, they were special, they were sort of untouchable.” (O-4)

*Car attributes.* Without the actual automobile, there would be no Corvette community to study. Since 1953, the Corvette has seen many body-style changes and continuous improvements in design and engineering. The car itself is what these enthusiasts fell in love with. Before the clubs, events or museum, there was simply an American made two-seater sports car that caught the eye of many men and women through the years. Most owners interviewed made sure to elaborate on what specific Corvettes they have owned in the past, and what model(s) they presently own. Most described their car with great detail, down to the options it had, and the colors it was both inside and outside. The importance of the physical attributes of the Corvette cannot be overlooked. Many owners got into the Corvette hobby because they wanted a car they could race with right out of the showroom. Many owners of the newest generation of Corvettes, the “C5” chose the car for the design that allowed a sports car to have ample cargo room and comfort. Whatever the specific reason was that an owner chose to purchase a Corvette over another vehicle, the car’s physical characteristics played a part in the choice.

“(The Corvette) has a sexy look, great sound, lots of horsepower. It is sporty, races well, looks great and competes very well against all competitors.” (O)

“The Corvette represents technology driven style, design, and performance at a reasonably competitive price.” (O-20)

“Depending on the car you want to compare it to, the Corvette is either bigger, faster, corners better, stops quicker, is more powerful, or less expensive.” (O-20)

“(I chose a Corvette for its) style, power, feel behind the wheel, and the looks that you receive while driving it.” (O-11)

“The Corvette’s handling and maneuverability, looks and price beat all others.” (O)

“I don’t think the Corvette can be touched with quality, price, performance, or anything. It is amazing to me that any cars still sell but they do.” (O-2)

*History, Corvette relation to life events.* The year 2003 marks the Corvette’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Fifty years of producing this car has kept the brand in the public’s mind without disruption. Enthusiasts interviewed told of their first Corvette memories, some dating back to the introduction of the first Corvette in 1953. Many of these owners dreamed of owning a Corvette from the time they were children. Others came from “General Motors families”, having parents or grandparents that spent their life working for the company and supporting the company’s products. These owners sometimes felt as if they were destined to own a Corvette someday. Many have been loyal to the brand since the beginning. They feel that the brand has reciprocated their loyalty by continuously improving throughout the last fifty years. An interesting part of many interviews was how the owners described their past using the Corvettes they owned as marks of time. Some mentioned that they dated their husband or wife, had children, or moved to a new location while they had a certain Corvette model. It was as though they could recall a Corvette

they owned in the past and remember important historical facts relevant to their personal lives that happened while they owned the car.

“I am a General Motors person. I grew up going to the (GM) Tech Center family night and picnics, etc. It feels right.” (O-18)

“(I realized my interest in Corvettes) the day of my birth! I was almost born in one!” (O)

“No other sports car has lasted so long or touched so many people.” (O)

“Its been a lifelong obsession.” (O)

“I have been a Corvette fanatic my entire life...friends and family were giving me Corvette toys from birth.” (O)

“(My first Corvette memory) I recall being about 5 years old riding in the back of my Dad’s ’64 coupe...I remember the sound of the car...and the look of the dashboard.” (O-13)

*American tradition, quality.* The Corvette is unofficially known as “America’s sports car” and the owners are very proud of that. Many participants mentioned the fact that the Corvette is made in the United States as a reason they are loyal to it. They feel that it shows patriotism to support a car that is made by Americans. Many owners would not even consider purchasing an import sports car because the companies behind the cars are not American owned and operated. Some owners describe owning the Corvette as “living the American Dream”. To them, the “dream” could not be fulfilled with any other sports car, especially not one made by an overseas company.

The Corvette assembly plant is in Bowling Green, Kentucky and its location fuels the surrounding area’s economy and tourism. The assembly plant and the National Corvette Museum are across the street from each other, and draw large crowds of energetic Corvette owners and curiosity seekers annually. It is said that these two facilities



are among the most popular tourist attractions in the entire state of Kentucky. Many owners interviewed like the small town feeling of Bowling Green and are happy to know that their Corvette purchases are helping American communities. They also like to support the town of Bowling Green and its residents because of the superior level of quality achieved at this assembly plant. Numerous awards have been given to the plant's staff for the continuous production of quality vehicles. Some owners like to give back to those that work hard to build their favorite car. Many cars on display in the National Museum are donated or lent by private owners. Assembly plant and museum staff are seen interacting with the owners (some of them are also owners) at events and on a daily basis. Overall, the owners recognize and appreciate Corvette's dedication to quality and they will continue to support the Americans that have a part in bringing their car to life.

“(When I drive my Corvette) I feel part of the DREAM.” (O-11)

“The Corvette makes you proud to drive American.” (O-15)

“The Corvette has never strayed too far from its heritage.” (O)

“Corvette is America's sports car because of its 50 year heritage of designing and building affordable sports cars in the United States that are reliable automobiles.” (O)

“The Corvette represents all that Americans like in a sports car.”  
(O-13)

“(The Corvette was) an American interpretation of the two-seater ragtop and has always gone in its own direction instead of trying to imitate anything else.” (O)

## *Executive Themes*

### *Corvette image*

While both Corvette owner and executive interviews identified interpersonal relations and Corvette image as two overarching themes, the owners are more able to discuss their experiences with interpersonal connections within the Corvette community than are the executives, which sometimes see the community from the outside looking in. Executives, however, are more prepared to discuss the car's image. They encounter decisions on a daily basis that relate to the physical car, how it looks and performs and what changes need to be made to preserve the car's image and tradition, while at the same time taking into account new styling and engineering options that may bring the car forward from its previous (but loved) model. This difference between owners and executives makes the interpersonal connections most important to the owners, while the image theme was most important to the executives.

Image is a difficult element to bring to an automobile. The Chevrolet Corvette has become an icon through a mix of history, advertising, marketing strategies, and owner activities. The designers, engineers, plant managers, communication personnel, museum staff and volunteers and all other workers involved with the car play an important part in maintaining the Corvette's image as everything the owners think it is. The Corvette production team has done a good job because many of the adjectives owners used to describe their favorite car are the exact words the executives used to tell about what they want the car to be and what type of image they'd like it to have.

“The name Corvette is synonymous with America or American cars and the freedom of travel...” (E-1)

“The image of the Corvette was strictly American muscle car...but now with its racing pedigree...it is not a want to be, it is a real player. Now the other guys are trying to beat it.” (E-1)

“(The Corvette) is sleek, sexy, and all muscle. You can go out to the beach, or the dragway and they are racing out there or you can see someone driving down the freeway with their little scarf...it’s for everybody.” (E-4)

*History.* The historical foundation of the brand Corvette is extremely important to the executives that work with the brand today. They have a responsibility to every past, present and future Corvette owner to preserve the elements that make the car so beloved and unique. Those interviewed often commented that most people know a Corvette when they see one. The car has a design all its own. This is what the executives need to balance the allure of the brands historical “look” with the need to update the design and features to bring it into the future.

This car has survived setbacks that have caused other brands to falter. The 1970s and early 1980s were bleak decades for many sports cars, not just the Corvette. From fuel economy standards to government safety regulations, performance cars suffered while trying to meet requirements and still keep their optimal level of performance and style. Many owners identified the 1970s and early 1980s as the most disappointing time in the car’s 50 year long history. While they realize the company wasn’t responsible for the stiffer regulations, and they did the best they could to keep the car at a high standard at the time, owners felt let down with the low horsepower available in those model years. They felt a Corvette that wasn’t superior in performance was going against what the car stood for. The executives agree that this time period was difficult and they are proud of the way the car rebounded from those hard times to become the car it is now.

“Corvette as a car certainly changed in a lot of ways, from styling and technology and quality and it responded to the fuel economy and government safety requirements but it still remained true to its roots...” (E-1)

“Corvette has a really proud heritage and when we research what we should do in the next Corvette it is almost like people love the car that they have, so they say don’t change anything, but of course you must because you need to keep the car right on the edge of new, innovative technology and design...” (E-3)

“We don’t want to tamper with the Corvette DNA, but we need to keep making the car fresh and new and technologically advanced and keep advancing the performance of the car. So we need to keep our feet firmly planted on the ground, and build from the excellent foundation that we have but keep stretching to exceed people’s expectations for how great a Corvette can become.” (E-3)

*Car attributes.* Among the executives interviewed were the chief engineer of the Corvette and the chief designer of the newest generation of Corvettes, the “C5”. These two positions are vital to the final Corvette model that makes it into production. The engineers and designers work hand in hand to create the performance and styling that is unique to this car. Physical attributes such as the easily identifiable Corvette taillights have been passed down from generation to generation of Corvettes, keeping owners connected to the Corvette heritage. Engineering improvements are ongoing, which help to keep the enthusiasts wanting to upgrade to the newest, most advanced model.

“One of the advantages of the (newest generation of Corvette), the C5 is that it was designed for a large variety of statures. It was designed for large people and small people, so almost anybody can drive one and get into it. I think that has opened up a whole new group of people (to the Corvette).” (E-2)

“I think that quality wise, the fact that Corvette won the JD Power and Associates award the last two years speaks for itself.” (E-2)

“We have worked very hard to make the Corvette of today different than the Corvette was previously and much more well-rounded, being able to do many things well and at high quality so that it really appeals to discriminating customers and makes it well worth the money.” (E-3)

“(According to customer research) the top areas they like about the car would be the performance from the power standpoint, the engine, and the functionality of the car. It is very easy to drive...” (E-4)

*American tradition, quality.* As mentioned above, the only Corvette assembly plant is in Bowling Green, Kentucky and the General Motors headquarters is in Detroit, Michigan. Some owners and executives participating in this study are from these two areas, but most were not. However, owners and executives took pride in the fact that the Corvette is one of the only sports cars made in the United States by an American company. General Motors has begun to market the Corvette as the true American sports car once again, after concentrating on other elements for the past few years. The patriotism shown in the United States recently has led them to again remind consumers that the Corvette is the only sports car available that has a proud American heritage that is still visible today.

The executives feel that they have achieved the goal of building a competitive sports car that can compete with European and other American sports cars on the racetrack, in everyday driving situations, and in overall value for the money spent. Owners and executives agree that the Corvette is the best "bang for the buck" in the sports car market.

“I think freedom and mobility are a couple of real engrained American values that we treasure and more than any other brand of car in the world, a Corvette kind of resonates with that freedom and mobility of the American spirit...” (E-3)

“I think we have more sophisticated people driving Corvettes today, because they may have been in an import and now they are coming back to an American car.” (E-3)

“The brand Corvette is the trademark of Chevrolet; it is also America’s favorite sports car. You know it’s apple pie and Corvette, you know there is nothing more American than Corvette. It’s known worldwide.” (E-4)

“It is great to have people say (the Corvette has a reputation of being a world-class product) about an American product that is made right here, engineered and designed and manufactured by American people, and it is as good as anything you can get anywhere from anybody.” (E-3)

#### *Social interaction*

Executives talked about their observations of Corvette owners and the personal connections they make with them. Many of the executives regularly attend Corvette events, and some executives are owners themselves, but most often they are attending to fulfill their role as a Corvette representative rather than as an owner. They are often invited to speak at event seminars, but after the official work is done, they can be found interacting with the owners that always have many questions and comments for them regarding the car. Word of mouth was mentioned as a very popular way for enthusiasts to spread information about the car. Some of the information passed along through owners originated from either official seminars conducted by these executives or by casual conversation with them. Those interviewed also spoke about “Corvette people” and the unique nature of the community. Even though the executives are more a part of constructing the actual car than they are active participants in the daily activities present in

the Corvette owner circles, what they had to say shed much light on the interpersonal element of Corvette ownership.

“It is a real friendly community more than anything. There are not a lot of secrets. There may be some that are more purists than others, but even in the long run they all talk to each other and have a great time.” (E-2)

“Going out and talking to people is part of...getting the word out about the Corvette. We think we are making a car good enough that the word of mouth helps sell the car and the kind of enthusiasm that you’ll find in an activity (like a national Corvette event). We hop it rubs off on (owners’) friends and their neighbors and that they will take somebody for a ride in their Corvette.”  
(E-3)

“Corvette people like to talk to other Corvette people. They like to see other Corvettes, they like to just get out and have fun....everybody wants to talk about their car, where they’ve been, what they’ve done...it’s just a really nice group of people.” (E-2)

*Pride, prestige, loyal behavior.* Making a vehicle that owners are proud to drive is not always easy. Any bit of bad press, such as frequent recalls, or poor safety components can tarnish the reputation of even the most beloved automobile. Luckily, the Corvette has kept itself at the top of its class, with the assembly plant winning a top quality award for the past two years, according to the plant’s communications director. The executives keep the car at its highest standard, in order to continuously satisfy the most discriminating customers, those spending over \$45,000 on an automobile.

Those interviewed have witnessed the pride owners feel while driving, showing and racing their cars firsthand from attending national, regional, and local events. Enthusiasts come from all over the world to experience the National Corvette Museum and to share in events with other owners. They are proud to say they own a Corvette and

by looking at the attendees at these events, it is apparent that they spend a great deal of money buying items of clothing that show their love for the Corvette brand. It is not uncommon for owners to bring various types of Corvette paraphernalia to these events in hopes that one of the executives responsible for a certain aspect of their car will place their autograph on the item. The respect that these Corvette executives receive from the community reaffirm their own love for the car, and remind them of the importance of their job; constructing the object of enthusiasm for so many owners.

The executives realize that they are dealing with extremely loyal consumers that feel a deep connection and bond with the Corvette brand. They can't get enough of Corvette, and are interested to know every detail about the process that brings their car to life.

“It is fascinating to be out in the field especially doing as nicely as we are now and we are really delighting customers and it always gives a huge amount of reinforcement and pride to visit with people for whom our work means a lot and it is really wonderful when that happens.” (E-3)

“(We are very proud that) the Bowling Green assembly plant has won the silver award, which is the number two quality award in all of North America, so our product beat out from a quality standpoint all the (other car company plants in the country).” (E-4)

“I lot of people who have never owned a Corvette up until the C5 (were given the opportunity to own one). Whether it was the quality or the packaging of the car, they said hey, I want one of those. And they have been hooked and they are repeat customers from 1997 all the way to 2002, (many have) had 3 or 4 C5s.” (E-1)

“I had a Corvette, then I got married, had a family, sold the Corvette, bought a station wagon and now I am buying another Corvette because it never really got out of my blood.” (E-2)



“We have 55,000 a year that come through the assembly plant, we are the second largest tourist stop in the state. We have families that stop in and are interested in the plant, and then we have a whole other group that are enthusiasts and they come back again and again because it is like a toy store to them to watch the cars being built.” (E-4)

“(The biggest thing I get out of volunteering my time at the museum is) the National Corvette Museum is the only museum dedicated to one particular automobile. I find that this particular museum is a place where most people can come and be happy. It is just a good group of people, loyal people that are here to listen, want to learn...everybody wants to participate if they can...it is just a fun group to be with.” (E-2)

“(Corvette people) are all great people and they are very, very proud of their car, they express their artistic side, or the designer in them (by modifying their cars).” (E-1)

*Corvette community, demographics of enthusiasts.* Without knowing what type of people make up the typical members of the Corvette community, these executives wouldn't know where to start in trying to please them. It is fair to say that most Corvette owners are older, many are retired, and most are at least middle to upper class, having enough disposable income to have a Corvette as their additional “fun car”. Many owners have been loyal to the brand since it started 50 years ago. Even if they didn't have the means to purchase one until much later, they had been fans of the car, and dreamed of owning one of their own someday. Being in control of someone's dream is a part of these executives job.

As mentioned earlier, the executives make an effort to interact with the owners at the events they attend. From a research and development standpoint, a lot of information can be gathered from speaking with the people that use the product. From an interpersonal standpoint, the executives converse with owners, making themselves part of

the community and by being accessible to owners, the community feels more like one big family rather than being separate groups of executives and consumers. It was mentioned that sometimes videotapes are made of impromptu interviews various Corvette employees conduct with owners at events asking them what they love about their car and what they may like to see changed. These tapes are then brought back to the offices in Bowling Green (and possibly Michigan) for those who were unable to attend the event to watch and learn what the owners had to say. A practice similar to this study is used to supplement official research data collection to inform executives of what the consumers are wanting in the next Corvette model.

“Part of my job when I go to (national events) is to take some media footage or notes of what customers are saying and bring it back to the (assembly) plant, because some of us don’t have the opportunity to be able to go to the shows...so we always try to bring the shows back to the people at the plant.” (E-4)

“Demographically I would say it is on our minds now that the Corvette population needs to be rejuvenated with younger people but it is challenging because the price of the car is pretty high. Is the Corvette relevant to young people entering the car purchase years, will Corvette be an inspirational brand for them as they grow up? We don’t have all the answers, we have a lot to learn and we want to make sure that we continue to make a car that is relevant.” (E-3)

“(The Corvette crowd is really diverse), you have younger people in their late twenties and early thirties that have money and really appreciate the new Corvette and then you have older people that have retired or retired early or still have a pretty good income that treat themselves to the Corvette and then we have collectors who are people in the Corvette business, it’s kind of their living...so it is a diverse crowd.” (E-1)

“The Corvette community is growing rapidly, but there is a small thing we call ‘Save the Wave. If you are driving

along in a Corvette and another Corvette goes the other way, you wave at the guy...it's a real friendly community more than anything." (E-2)

"Corvette people get more out of life than ordinary people do, they have the kind of spirit that the car has, an adventurous spirit."  
(E-3)

## Discussion

The results of this study helped to answer the questions presented earlier. Questions such as whether or not owners and executives agree with the “America’s sports car” label, how and why the Corvette continues to attract new buyers, what keeps consumers loyal to the car many of them dreamed of owning when they were young, why clubs are rapidly increasing in membership, where owners go to uncover new information on the brand, what role social interaction plays in the reinforcement of brand loyalty, and what social constructions owners and executives hold pertaining to the Corvette and its community. Inquiries relating to consumer brand loyalty, how loyalty is created, sustained, and reinforced through media efforts and social interaction were explained through the data gathered.

Using elements of grounded theory, overarching themes became apparent because of certain key words, phrases, and topics that were addressed by participants throughout the in-depth interviews. For example, words such as family, community, and network were used to describe being associated with the Corvette owner group. Social interaction was mentioned in every interview as a factor in creating and sustaining loyal behavior. Most interviews stressed the importance of relationships formed with others within the Corvette network. Various relationship dynamics were noted, leading to sub-categories created to organize the types of interactions discovered. Key words and feelings associated with the Corvette image theme included the mentioning of American quality, history, heritage, superior design, technology, and constant advancement. There were

many specific words and ideas that were used to convey a feeling an owner or executive has when working with or enjoying the automobile. Participants share their enthusiasm for the car, but are from varying backgrounds and are of different ages and genders, which made the congruency of their interviews sometimes surprising.

Constructing themes and sub-categories allowed the data to become organized in a way that explained how most participants feel and think about their brand. While some of those spoken to are more dedicated to the car than others, the majority share similar loyal feelings and behaviors toward the car, which are reflected in the organization of themes and sub-categories. It should be mentioned that most participants were very positive in their descriptions of the Corvette community and their place in it. While there are certainly negative aspects of every product, these enthusiasts seem to seek out information that confirms their outlook on the automobile. They tend to remember the positive reviews and the awards given to the car and either chose to ignore or are not as concerned with the possible negative publicity the car may receive. It is important to take into account that this product is not perfect, but in the eyes of the owners and executives interviewed for this study, in their opinion it is very close.

Media and information gathering was shown by the research to be the linking element between the two themes of social interaction and Corvette image because of the interplay discovered while speaking with owners and executives about how they gather and disseminate information. Owners stressed the importance of having the most current information on the brand, and noted that they consulted every written material possible, but foremost they consulted other owners and took into account the seminars presented by executives at events. The executives stated that they are aware of the community's

interest in everything Corvette and have used various types of media to convey this information to consumers. The cycle of executives releasing information and the enthusiasts seeking it out creates the link that keeps the community content and allows those working with the brand to create a product that will ensure the loyalty to the vehicle will continue into the future.

In analyzing the owner and executive interviews, along with observing various Corvette events, the research has shown that there is a mix of various elements that lead to the enthusiasm and consumer loyalty found in the Corvette community. The process of creating and sustaining a loyal consumer in relation to the Corvette is part of an information and interpersonal communication cycle. Owners and executives are linked through mass communication efforts that disperse new model information, technological and design upgrades, and the company's advertising, marketing, promotion, and product placement efforts. In other words, the media are what get the potential buyers to take notice of the Corvette. It is through the company's media efforts that the Corvette gained the favorable image it has today as being "America's sports car" and as being a prestigious, special, superior quality sports car. Advertisements of the past and present, along with product placement such as the inclusion of the Corvette as a pace car in prominent auto races like the Daytona 500, and the Corvette being the grand prize in national contests (like those tied with beverage and fast food companies) all promote the image of the Corvette being a literal "grand prize," a car that everyone aspires to own, that makes the owner of such a car a person that stands out from the crowd and is seen by others as being successful. Many of the participants in this study mention that they have been fans of the car since its introduction in 1953. Most were only in grade school at the

time, but were still influenced by the image that the Corvette was marketed to have. Now, fifty years later, the heritage of the car plays an important role in many participant's choice to stay loyal to the brand. They feel the Corvette connects them with their past, and is often a symbol of their personal successes to be able to own the car they dreamed of when they were younger. Many owners and executives could recall the exact circumstances surrounding their first memory of seeing, driving, and purchasing a Corvette. Some categorize their past by which car they owned at the time an important event happened in their lives. A few participants mentioned dating their husband or wife while they owned a certain Corvette, or taking a special vacation in a certain model. Most of those interviewed said that the car was a reward for their hard work and success in life.

When consumers purchase the car, they also buy into the Corvette community, regardless of whether or not they decide to join a club. This is how the information and communication cycle continues. Once the media brings the consumer to the Corvette, they become an owner and are reinforced of their purchase decision by the often daily reminders of the fact that they are a part of the Corvette family. The reason Corvette clubs and events have grown in membership and attendance through the years has a lot to do with interpersonal connections that are available to owners through these activities. Both executives and owners interviewed made it clear that the people are what keep them involved with the car community, above all else. In seeking information on the car, owners said that they consult other owners before consulting other official sources like trade magazines and web sites. Corvette owners are eager to seek out information on their car and are willing to upgrade to the newest, most advanced model available to them. Many participants have owned over five Corvettes in their lifetime, some owning more

than one at a time. This loyalty can only be explained through a combination of mass media efforts and the relationship owners have with each other. Both need to be working together in order for the loyalty to be created and sustained, as it is within the network of Corvette enthusiasts.

It was important to get the opinions of Corvette executives for this study because it is the physical automobile that led to the creation of the community. However, once the owners purchase the car, what they decide to do with it is up to them and the company can't dictate what happens to the brand after the purchase. They can control media elements, but above all, the owners make the car what it is. They created the clubs for themselves, and although General Motors and its employees participate in many activities, the owners manage the clubs, volunteer their time and keep the community what it is, a place for Corvette owners to share their knowledge and love for the car, and to interact with each other on a personal basis above and beyond their enthusiasm for the car.

The Corvette community is founded on the concept that owners feel special about the car they own. Having a Corvette Museum near to the assembly plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky for owners to tour gives them a place to hold national events, a sort of "home base." There is a type of ritual that was put in place between the museum and the assembly plant to further reinforce the pride and prestige an owner of a Corvette should feel when purchasing the car and entering the community. For an extra fee, a new vehicle can be picked up by "museum delivery" during one of the national events instead of being delivered the traditional way, to a dealership. The proud owners get to see their car behind the velvet rope, on display in the museum next to a plaque bearing their names. Photographs are taken of them in the car, and they are presented with custom Corvette



jackets with their names and particular car sewn on them, and with museum guests watching their car is driven out of the museum. This ritual was worth mentioning because it represents all that is unique and special about the Corvette owner experience. The activities put into place resonate with all that people want, to be recognized, to feel like they are part of a group, and to be accepted by peers. This practice of delivering a car in such a prestigious way is part of what sets the Corvette apart from every other car in the enthusiast's mind.

To the enthusiasts, the brand Corvette means more than just an American made sports car with a sleek design. The physical attributes of the car are important, if the car wasn't something special, the owners may not have chosen to buy it, but more than the actual car, the community that the owners have built for themselves sets this car apart. This network of owners gives them a chance to connect with others who share their love for the car, and it also allows people to do things they wouldn't normally have the chance to do. There are thousands of clubs across the country and internationally, each with their own presidents, and officers. People like to be the big fish in a small pond. They like to be a part of a close knit group, but at the same time, to know that there is a bigger picture. The Corvette community allows for people to interact on a local level and also to meet with others from all over the world to share in their chosen hobby.

Overall, the company's advertising, marketing, and product placement efforts convey to the consumer how prestigious and special owning a Corvette is. Once they make the purchase, the reinforcement comes from the interpersonal connections within the network of Corvette enthusiasts. Things like the "Corvette wave," the national and local events, contact with executives, the museum, and the available Corvette paraphernalia all

continue to make the owner feel as though they are part of a family and they have a car that makes them feel special. Everything within the community is linked through the media, mass communication, and information gathering. The executives design and construct the car given its heritage and the elements that are important to the target audience. The advertising and marketing people get the word out, the owners seek out this information, spread it around through word of mouth and the cycle continues with each new model and advancement. The media activity gets the consumers to notice the car, purchase, and then their decision is reinforced through the Corvette family.

## Conclusions

The information presented in the discussion section shows that the value of interpersonal relationships among people, in this case Corvette owners and executives, cannot be discounted when studying loyal consumers of a certain brand. Interviews that asked a variety of questions about the Corvette and the social groups that have formed around the car provided data that identified the social aspect of owning the car as being the most important factor in developing and sustaining loyal enthusiast behavior. The participants stressed the interpersonal connections they have with other owners and employees of the brand as being what sets the Corvette apart from any other automobile. The object upon which the enthusiasm is focused is only one element in the mix that contributes to brand loyalty. More than the car itself, the people involved, including those who own the car and those who design and construct the car turn this loyalty into a way for people to fulfill their innate need to interact with others, to be a part of a group, and feel as though they are appreciated.

The interviews reached into the minds of the owners and executives to learn why they are excited and stay excited about the physical car, and to observe the enthusiasm they conveyed when speaking about the Corvette family and its people. The spoke passionately about the relationships they've developed between themselves and other owners and how these interactions keep the enthusiasm they feel towards the Corvette alive.

The research has shown that most owners did not mention Corvette's advertisements and other marketing efforts as being important to them in staying current on Corvette information. It seems as though these loyal consumers pay more attention to word of mouth advertising and firsthand information gathered from peers, event seminars and club newsletters than solely through the advertising produced by the company directly. If the owners could recall any past or recent Corvette ads, it was usually the print ads because many collect them. Once a consumer becomes an owner, the community is where they turn to first to discover new information and less often do they turn to outside media first.

Through the interviewing process it was very interesting to hear both executives and owners talk about their first and most memorable Corvette memories. Many remembered instances in great detail about where they saw the Corvette when they were younger and began their dream of owning one. Those interviewed really opened up and shared personal memories and feelings about their connection to the Corvette that they may not have thought much about in a long time. Some questions asked in the interviews made the participants verbalize feelings that they have come to take for granted. Inquiries about how owning the car portrays them to others, and their reactions to the praise and affirmation of others seemed to evoke the most emotion. It was apparent that these enthusiasts think of the Corvette as much more than just a car that gets them from place to place. They see the Corvette as a part of their lives, as a mark of their successes, and as a constant reminder of how they are a part of a worldwide network of people who enjoy this hobby as much as they do.

This research is important because it was approached in a way that is different from most previous studies on consumer brand loyalty and the behaviors that result from this loyalty. It allowed the participants to speak their minds, address issues and topics that they felt were important and it also let them share their opinions. Many studies on brand loyalty consult purchase information and let the numbers speak for themselves, or they simply ask survey questions with little room for elaboration. This study introduces another element, the chance for the owners who buy the car and perpetuate the loyal behavior and the executives that create the car to speak in their own words about their passion. Where a strictly quantitative study using purchase information may conclude that a consumer who has bought five models of the same car must be more loyal to the brand than someone who has only purchased one, this study allows for variation. Some owners who have presented themselves as the most loyal have only owned one Corvette, which in some cases may be the first one they ever bought, maybe thirty or forty years ago. Is this person less loyal than someone who buys a new vehicle every year? This study was designed to allow for all types of loyal owners to convey their feelings on the car and to share their loyalty and explain the cause for it.

Participant observation, while only used as a context for information gathered from the interviews, also added to this study and made it more fruitful. Without understanding the functioning of the community, analyzing the statements made by enthusiasts may have been more difficult and less accurate.

A potential limitation in this study is how the topic itself was decided upon. Having family members who own or have owned Corvettes, the researcher knew of and was interested in the Corvette community as a potential topic to study because of the

observations made while accompanying family and friends to Corvette events. Without being exposed to this group of enthusiasts and its events in the past, studying the phenomenon of brand loyalty in the automotive community may not have been chosen. While the researcher is neither an owner nor a Corvette employee, previously witnessed loyal behavior by Corvette enthusiasts was the inspiration to study how and why this loyalty developed and continued.

Some other limitations to this study are that the participants were found through a convenience sampling process. Some owners may be more loyal and involved with the Corvette community than the average owner. The executives chosen to be interviewed were picked because of how their job position related to the information needed to supplement the owner interviews. The participant observation that took place represented events in the Midwest and South, no events in the Northern states, the East Coast or West were attended. Questions asked of the executives and owners may have led them to think specifically about a certain aspect of their enthusiasm that they may not have mentioned as being important, had the question not been asked of them. These factors could have affected the information gathered.

A different perspective may have been interesting to identify in this study, that being interviews with people not at all affiliated with the Corvette. Their opinions would have allowed us to see what the common person thinks about the car, and about the people who own the car. Would they use the same adjectives to describe the Corvette and its image? It would have also been interesting to compare another brand loyal group (Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners, or Mustang owners, for example) to the Corvette

community in order to see if there are common characteristics of all enthusiasts, regardless of what specific object their fandom is based upon.

This research could be expanded upon to further benefit advertisers and marketers. More specific questions could be asked pertaining to certain promotional activities conducted by the company and how well they reached and related to loyal consumers of the brand. New and improved advertising and product placement could be designed from speaking with owners and figuring out what their hobbies are outside of the car. Further research could also be conducted in the discipline of psychology. Using consumer groups to analyze group or interpersonal dynamics could be beneficial to those studying human behavior. Some common rituals present within the Corvette community could also be studied in order to further understand these practices and what they signify. This research can be a good starting point for further in-depth analyzing of group phenomenon.

In conclusion, this research has shown that people are always looking to find a group with which they can associate themselves and use to further their self-esteem and sense of belonging. The Corvette community can be representative of other automobile communities, and even various other types of clubs devoted to a specific hobby. The members have an underlying similarity in that they share a common bond that provides them with a basis for interaction. They share a love for the automobile, or whatever other object their enthusiasm is based upon. This item ties them together, and allows them to create social opportunities for interaction using the bond of the hobby. As mentioned earlier, the actual item becomes secondary once the enthusiasts meet and form connections with each other. The group then takes on a different or additional purpose, to bring people together for friendship and to create activities designed to further the social and

interpersonal aspect of the group. A community is developed through the network of enthusiasts and a “family” feeling is formed. In speaking with this study’s participants, many noted that the clubs they belong to focus more on social activities than on car specific events. Dinners, barbecues, and various other social outings have come to overshadow things like road rallies and racing. With the exception of a few, those interviewed were pleased by the change and said that they were more likely to participate in the social events because those activities were what kept them interested in remaining members of the clubs.

The automotive community is a mixture of many different elements that invigorate owners and executives in a way that leads them to exhibit loyal behavior towards their brand. Without every element present (superior styling and engineering, technological advancements, national and international owner events and club membership opportunities), the Corvette family would not be exactly what this study has shown it to be; a community group that has formed upon the foundation of a unique automobile with fifty years of history attached to it, and has created a network of enthusiasts who share their loyalty to the brand by organizing clubs and events to achieve the main goal of socially interacting with others who share their common bond of loyalty and enthusiasm for this particular automobile.



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## Appendices

## **Appendix A:**

### **Corvette Owner Themes**

#### **General Questions**

1. What is your age?
2. Where are you located?
3. What is your profession?
4. Do you have any direct connection to the automotive industry?  
To Corvette itself?
5. When did you first realize your interest in Corvettes?
6. When did you first purchase a Corvette?  
What were the circumstances?
7. Were you interested in Corvettes before purchasing one?  
How long before?
8. What prompted you to choose the Corvette over other cars?
9. Which other cars did you think about buying?
10. Did you have any friends or acquaintance that owned a Corvette before you?
11. How many Corvettes do you own now?  
How many have you owned in the past?
12. Is there anything that sets you apart from most other Corvette owners?

#### **Club Membership**

1. What club(s) are you a member of?
2. What prompted you to join a club?  
What were you expecting to get out of it?
3. How many years have you been a member or a club?
4. How have club activities changed through the years?
5. Do you find that your club focuses on the automobile (shows, races)?  
Or more on social aspects (dinners, parties)?
6. How much time do you spend per month on club related activities?
7. Do you socialize with members of the club outside organized activities?  
How often?
8. What do you feel is the biggest gain you have received from club membership?

#### **Corvette Specifics**

1. Can you recall your first Corvette memory?
2. Can you recall any memorable Corvette ads of the past?

## Appendix A: (Continued)

3. Can you recall any current Corvette ads or promotions you've seen recently?
4. Would you say that you are loyal to this brand?  
If so, why?
5. Do you feel that the Corvette is "America's Sports Car"?  
If so, why?
6. What sets the Corvette apart from other cars in its class?
7. Why do you think the Corvette has not only survived, but thrived in recent years?
8. How would you describe the "image" of the Corvette?
9. Do you feel that the C5 was a positive addition to the brand?
10. How do you feel the C5 measures up against other sports cars currently on the market?
11. How did the C5 affect the Corvette's image?
12. Do you think the average person knows a Corvette when they see one?
13. Have you noticed younger people taking an interest in the brand?
14. Do you feel that most Corvette owners are similar to yourself?  
If so, in what ways?
15. If you have children, are they showing interest in Corvettes?
16. What other car models (if any) have a similar following to the Corvette?
17. Is the Corvette a part of your everyday life?  
If so, how?

## Emotional Connection

1. How do you make decisions regarding your car?

Do you talk to experts?

Consult written materials?

Ask friends?

2. Describe how you feel when driving your Corvette.
3. How do you feel when someone compliments your car?
4. How do you feel owning a Corvette portrays you to others?
5. How important is each of the following to you?:
  - The Corvette's image as a status symbol.
  - The Corvette's racing image.
  - The Corvette's physical attributes (design & style).
  - The Corvette community (clubs & activities).
6. Have you ever come across someone who has taken their love for the Corvette too far?
7. Do you feel that you are a part of the Corvette community?

## **Appendix A: (Continued)**

Would you still feel that way if you owned the car, but were not involved in a club?

8. Have you ever been dissatisfied with the Corvette or its community?  
If so, what brought you back?
9. Do you feel an emotional connection to your car?  
Please describe.

## **Appendix B:**

### **Corvette Executive Themes**

#### **General Questions**

1. What is your official job title?
2. What are your responsibilities?
3. How many years have you been working this position?
4. Do you own a Corvette?  
How many?  
How long have you owned them?
5. Are you a part of any Corvette organizations outside your job?  
Which ones?
6. Were you interested in Corvette before you started working this position?

#### **Observations and Opinions**

1. What kind of direct contact do you have with Corvette clubs, organizations and enthusiasts?
2. Can you describe the enthusiasm you witness?
3. What is the most common demographic of people you see taking an interest in the Corvette?
4. How would you describe the Corvette's image?
5. How has it changed through the years?
6. How would you describe the "Corvette community"?
7. Has the C5 changed that community in any way?

#### **Corvette Specific Questions**

1. In talking to owners and through research, what do people like about the car, and what do they want changed?
2. How does Corvette relay official information to the public?
3. What types of people do you see visiting the Corvette museum and taking assembly plant tours? (families, middle aged men, etc.)
4. How were the low sales years (the late 70's-mid 80's) overcome to re-excite the buyers with the C4 and C5?
5. How will the new C6 model affect the Corvette brand image?
6. How would you compare the Corvette to other cars in its class?
7. What is done by the company to help reinforce consumer loyalty to the Corvette?

## **Appendix B: (Continued)**

8. What attributes of the car are emphasized by GM in advertising? (image, technological advancements, racing performance, etc.)
9. Which of these attributes do you feel the owners most identify with?
10. In observing national Corvette events, what do you think brings these people out to celebrate the Corvette?  
What are they getting out of the experience?
11. Why do you feel the Corvette is “America’s Sports car”?