



»» THE GREEN ISSUE

Under the ‘Hood

PhillyCarShare cultivates street cred.

by [Kate Kilpatrick](#)

There’s nothing hip-hop about cruising around in a hybrid hatchback. Driving an eco-friendly car suggests you’re progressive, a sensible consumer, maybe even green chic. But green vehicles don’t scream grown and sexy, and you’re definitely not stunting in a Prius.

“Green hasn’t translated into the urban community,” says Tayyib Smith, founder of Little Giant Media Inc. and a consultant to PhillyCarShare on how to market community-based car-sharing to urban youths.

“Your [Toyota] Yaris drivers—that’s as far away from black America as you can possibly get,” says Smith.

When PhillyCarShare started five years ago, members were primarily green types—people concerned about their carbon footprints and reducing automotive dependency in urban culture. Today PhillyCarShare has more than 28,000 members, with nearly 3,800 signing up in the last month.

When Smith first met with PhillyCarShare, he says the company was interested in running advertisements on hip-hop radio stations like Power 99 and 103.9 the Beat to broaden its membership.

Listen to the most popular songs on either station and you’ll hear a lot of car swagger, but no one’s bragging about gas efficiency or alternative fuel sources. In their new singles 50 Cent wrecks a new Jag and upgrades from a “Benzo” to the “Enzo [Ferrari],” while T-Pain rides around in a rimmed-out BMW M6, and Cassidy talks about “Big wheels, big chromes/ I’m doin’ it big, homes.” Meanwhile in “You Know What It Is,” T.I. raps about increasing—not reducing—his car ownership: “Chopping, there ain’t a car I ain’t got/ I’m the No. 1 customer at my own car lot.”

“There’s no point running ‘go green’ commercials on 103.9 because the whole narrative of urban radio has nothing to do with the environment,” Smith says.

Instead he recommended more guerrilla forms of marketing—such as viral Internet videos and spontaneous “live commercials.” During these events local breakdancers and capoeira dancers lay down linoleum with the PhillyCarShare logo in Rittenhouse Square or on South Street or at Unity Day on the Parkway. As the dancers perform, street teams pass out car-share information to the crowd that gathers to watch.

Smith also suggested PhillyCarShare reach young black drivers by highlighting the convenience and cost-effectiveness of the service. “‘Today I can be driving a Mini; tomorrow I can be driving an Audi’—that’s what will transfer to the urban demographic.”

“At first we just had green cars. But we wanted to appeal to a larger audience—people who want to take a car for a few hours for job interviews or to host clients or for longer trips and fun excursions like going to the shore or the Poconos,” says Clayton Lane, PhillyCarShare’s deputy executive director and co-founder.

To that end, in March 2006 PhillyCarShare began adding more luxury models to its fleet, including BMW 325is, Audi A4s, Volvo S40s, Mazda Miatas, and convertible and hard-top Minis. Next month four brand-new Lexuses will be available for share.

Lane says the premium or “aspirational” cars currently make up about a quarter of the PhillyCarShare fleet. The majority of these models are “discreetly branded”—meaning they don’t have the big goofy logos printed on the doors. (Although according to PhillyCarShare survey results, 75 percent of members say they’re proud of the logos and like how they stand out.)

Also unlike the hybrids, which are most commonly painted bright red, the premiums come in more refined colors like silver and black, colors that are more palatable to a younger, hipper generation.

“Red cars are not fly at all,” explains Smith.

But Smith believes being young and fly doesn’t mean you can’t care about the environment.

“Although I work in hip-hop and R&B and entertainment, I do care a lot about the environment. And it bothers me that it hasn’t transferred to urban America,” says Smith, adding that if the hip-hop generation goes green it could be the catalyst for a powerful environmental movement.

“Whatever is hip in the ’hood essentially becomes hip to a wider audience. And if it doesn’t translate to black people it’s not going to translate to the larger pop demographic. If there was essentially a green ‘Jesus Walks’ or something that made people say, ‘Hey, we need to care more about our environment,’ I think it could go a really long way.”

Kate Kilpatrick (kkilpatrick@philadelphia weekly.com) is PW’s senior arts and entertainment editor.