

It's never been better for the Swedish survival machine



VOLVO (the rough translation of this Latin word is, "I roll"), has rolled up an impressive victory in our market — it's the top-selling car of its type, and has been for eight years.

It's done this in spite of market dips and market slides — our new car market has been mostly all downhill for the last eight years — and what's more it has mostly increased volume in spite of all the cries of woe and the wearing of black crepe by the less successful.

Why this is so is a good question, and it's sparked some lively clawing and back-biting in a section of industry — the new car business — which has never been overly generous in the treatment of competitors. Not successful ones like Volvo anyway.

Volvos have been called dull and stolid, uninteresting and tanks, the prize in the bad-name stakes going to the priceless one-liner that Volvos encapsulate "all the sexual hang-ups of the Swedish population."

Maybe. But they have gone on selling, gone on winning friends, and have gone on with the job of proving themselves one of the most salable motor cars around.

It needs an answer, and the short one is that the smart critics have egg on their faces.

One does not have to probe the Volvo phenomenon too deeply to knock up against the down-to-earth reality of these cars. It's that they are designed for a particular segment of the market — young affluent and younger company executives instantly come to mind — and that Volvo's research has unerringly hit the target.

What's more, they are a pretty good car in the sense of what motoring is about in contrast to what it is often thought to be about.

Providing the plugs and fuel injection are in reasonable condition, Volvos always start. Nothing falls off them, and they keep their looks for long periods. Even better, service charges are not ruinous and service itself is predictable. As cars that are used in day-to-day work they have their ups and downs — even Volvos are not immune from the odd disaster — but when a balance is struck on the motoring ledger they show up better than most. And a whole lot better than a

sprinkling of others at similar prices.

Such mundane triumphs today are enough to make any car popular, but a Volvo has a lot more going for it. Today's Volvo is motoring's great survival kit.

The Volvo comes from the company that brought you seat belts. Volvo researched collision and impact statistics for more than 10 years, then put together its findings in a massive paper that couldn't be brushed away. We all wear seat belts in this country today largely because of Volvo's efforts.

Then there is the safety structure of the car itself. Volvo wasn't the first car manufacturer in the world to build hull structures that collapsed at a predictable rate — Daimler-Benz took a patent out on this in 1949 — but it was one of the first companies which went about building cars in this thoughtful way, and it was definitely the first widely to publicise its efforts.

If the Volvo "safety" theme now seems a little worn, and if Volvo has a fault it perhaps leans on this theme for a mite too long in the recent period, the fact remains that these are safe cars in the obvious sense of what this means when a resistible object meets an immovable force.

Today, Volvo's car research is centered on a knotty area which is all but incomprehensible to other than computer scientists. It's the attempt to define car behaviour in relation to human behaviour so that a car always responds in a manner which is familiar to its driver and easily understood.

It's Volvo's contention that when this is achieved its cars will be a whole lot safer again. Ordinary people will be able to drive them and retain control even in extraordinary situations. It is a tall order, of course, but in fairness Volvo has already gone a long way to achieving it with its current line of cars.

Ah, yes, the current line of Volvo cars. These are the ones which were previewed a little time back (*Weekend Review*, December, 19, 1980), and which have already caused a mild stir in the first quarter of this year's market.

Put bluntly, they have zapped the luxury car sector (generally accepted as that area above \$10,000), and have run out to be the most successful European car in the total market.

Drawing on figures from the Melbourne-based motor industry research group, Adaps, 1,733 Volvos were sold in the January to March period, giving these cars 20.2 per cent of the luxury market and 1.66 per cent of the total market. This follows sales of 6,460 Volvos last year compared with 6,327 in 1979. According to Volvo, this January to March was the best period for its car sales since the mid-1970s.

"It's embarrassing, too," said a Volvo executive this week. He was worried that demand for Volvos would unduly outstrip supply and that waiting times for new Volvos would stretch out and force buyers into competitive makes. Already, Volvo's local stock had been run down to low levels, he said, and there was no chance that the January to March rate of selling could be maintained for the whole year. The problem is that even though the majority of Volvos are locally assembled, these cars are still subject to a quota restriction. They are not available in unlimited quantities.

Volvo's success on our market undoubtedly has a price-related basis.

These cars span in 20 closely graduated steps a particularly sensitive area from \$11,790 (Volvo 244DL manual) to \$24,970 (Volvo 265GLE automatic), with a foot in the low-cost end as it were (this always surprises those who investigate Volvos), and another where the very high-priced machinery starts. And around the middle it is nicely placed with its handsome and well-equipped Volvo GLEs (\$18,950 to \$20,670) to cream off that company buying which is linked to tax depreciation allowances.

A large part of the charm of these cars is that nothing much changes with time. Last year's Volvo is pretty much like this year's, and the fact is that fundamental design has changed little in a decade.

Mind you, Volvos become better by evolution. Last year's car is good, but small touches make it better this year, just as presumably a few more small touches will make it that bit better again in 1982.

The current Volvo line, for example, has picked up a slightly increased glass area over last year's cars, radiator grilles have been mildly re-styled, and clever paintwork around window surrounds and body sills has eased the previous Volvo

"heaviness" of line.

Best of all, perhaps, engine compression ratios have been increased to give a little more power combined with improved fuel burning efficiency, and hence a useful lift in economy, while fuel injection is standard across the whole line except for two base models.

All this is worthwhile, representing as it does a dash of Swedish commonsense — this company, while a respected one, makes only around 270,000 cars a year, too few to permit the cost of major change to be returned in increased sales. For Volvo, confident, small steps are its path to the future. The present cars will be around for some time to come.

Getting into a Volvo GLE recently (four-speed manual transmission with overdrive), was as familiar as pulling on an old pair of shoes. The competent building of Volvos never ceases to impress, as does the easy way they go about their work — large, comfortable, well-mannered, this one rolled along, no fuss, no nonsense. Just pleasant motoring, just easy running.

It's just possible the smart critics are partly right. If an overwhelming impression comes across in a Volvo it is that one is indestructible. Pity help the bus that gets in the way! This is not true, of course. But it takes an effort of will to pull oneself together, to actually believe real-life physical forces apply to you personally.

Yet it is also easy to understand why these cars are so successful in their market segment, why they have done so well in the first months of this year. There is an honesty about them nothing else quite matches.

They do not pretend to be trendy or performance machines, much less to be stylish extravaganzas of the vast glass area and hatchback ilk. No, they tell you they are an entirely conventional motor car, just as they show you that they do everything a conventional motor car should.

This may not be an aspiration of commanding height, but what is attained is realistic and utterly convincing. A mini victory in our confused motoring world, perhaps, but a victory for all that. If only half the cars that are made today did it half as well! Roll on, Volvo, roll on.