

Who's laughing now?

Courtney Caldwell convinces the skeptics

SHARON ASCHAIK
Woman's Touch

Courtney Caldwell will never forget the time she was laughed out of the room by an automaker executive.

It was back in the early 1990s, when she was launching her female-consumer-oriented auto magazine *American Woman Road and Travel* (now *Road & Travel Magazine*, or *RTM*), and trying to get support from the Detroit Three.

"They were literally laughing in my face, throwing my magazine across the desk, and saying, 'This is a joke; you have to be kidding,'" Caldwell recalls. "I faced a lot of doubting Thomases who said they would never get into the women's market."

Of course, *RTM* has evolved into anything but a joke: thanks to Caldwell's business savvy and relentless determination, the publication, now strictly web-based and refreshed weekly, is a leading resource for automotive, travel and road-safety tips worldwide for both women and men.

Originally, Caldwell had a different goal in mind with the publication: improving the public reputation of motorcycling and female motorcyclists.

Then an event organizer and media specialist as well as an avid bikie, Caldwell was involved in organizing a 22-state, 130-day publicity tour for the industry, which was sponsored by companies such as Suzuki, Honda and Kawasaki, and during which she rode 15 different motorcycles across 4,000 miles.

At the time, Caldwell also created and produced Cruise-Aid for Diabetes, a 50-mile celebrity motorcycle cruise that raised several hundred thousand dollars for the Juvenile Diabetes Association (now Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation).

Caldwell's contributions to enhancing the public perception of motorcycling made her the first woman to receive the Motorcycle Industry Council's highest public relations award, and one of a very few women to be honoured by the National Motorcycle Hall of Fame in Ohio.

During this time, Caldwell met many women who shared their experiences of being mistreated not only while out riding their motorcycles, but



TONY ARIA

Courtney Caldwell presents the inaugural Earth Angel Award in 2008, honouring the most environmentally progressive automaker of that year, worldwide.

when trying to purchase vehicles — experiences to which Caldwell could relate.

"I thought, I work just as hard for my money as men, and I should not be treated differently at a dealership. That's why I started the magazine," she says.

For the first few years, she says, marketers refused to "gamble" on her publication, which started with a motorcycle focus, then moved exclusively into automotive. But Caldwell was confident in her vision and in the economic power of the women's market, and she went as far as selling her car and investing the money, along with insurance money from a previous car accident, into the initiative to sustain it until automakers caught on.

Caldwell's bet has long since paid off. Today, the website, www.roadandtravel.com, attracts up to 1.5 million page views per month to its more than 6,000 pages of content.

Living ahead of the curve, taking calculated risks and having lots of fun along the way has been Caldwell's lifelong *modus operandi*, and it's served her very well.

In the late '70s, while living in Rhode Island, she converted her new '79 Chevy van into a limo and started VANity Fare, a service for chauffeuring groups to sporting events.

In the early '80s, after moving to L.A., Caldwell became one of the first women in Hollywood to succeed as a movie stuntperson, working in films with stars such as Sam Elliott, Goldie Hawn and Kurt Rus-

sell.

In 1997, with *RTM* enjoying strong momentum, Caldwell started the International Car of the Year Awards, which today is the largest auto awards show in the industry. She's since introduced and runs other awards initiatives such as International Truck of the Year, Most Environmentally Friendly Car & Truck of the Year and the Earth Angel Award for the most eco-friendly automaker.

Caldwell, who's lived in Detroit since 1998 and is now a grandmother of two teenagers, is still on a roll: she says she spends 90 hours a week running her business, sharing her automotive and travel expertise on TV and radio news programs, being the spokesman for companies such as Jiffy Lube, State Farm Insurance and the International Carwash Association and, most recently contributing to *Earth Wind & Power*, a new blogazine that informs consumers on how to reduce their carbon footprints.

And yet, as dynamic as her business and life have become, it's still the simple rewards that keep driving her forward.

"When I get e-mail from readers saying this article really helped me, it saved me gas or helped me do the right thing when my car broke down, it's so great to know that all of this work has meaning and value," she says. "It's hard work, but the fruit of the labour is well worth it."