



The strong frontal impression of the Sunbeam Venezia Superleggera, above, contrasts with its elegant profile, right.

Selling to Europe

By Ernest Hanwell



THERE IS ONE THING COMMON to all European countries—that is pride; and it is this pride which is responsible for a reluctance to buy British cars.

In the years immediately after the war there was a desire for and interest in British cars, but the European buyer was ignored in an effort to sell in the dollar markets. Since difficulties have forced our exporters to pay more attention to Europe, little or nothing has been done to convince the continental motorists that the cars offered to them are not rejects from the American market.

On the contrary, our sales methods and after-sales service, because of an almost complete lack of market research, have strengthened this belief and have further injured the pride of would-be buyers. Nevertheless, there is much goodwill towards Britain and British-made goods which comes from our wartime alliance.

Once the British motor industry stops treating the continental countries as poor relations, and gives the impression that they are important buyers there will be an unlimited export outlet for our cars. Sales, of course, will not be easy; it is always difficult to gain a foothold in an established market, but they will be much easier than at present.

They Like Our Cars

For the past three years, as a motoring correspondent and business consultant, I have spent four or five months out of every 12 touring western Europe, talking to people in the streets as well as to business executives. In consequence I have been convinced that the people across the channel like our cars but they do not like our business methods.

The British motor industry must remember that Europe is not one vast market, but is several individual markets, each with their own needs, their likes and dislikes. For example, the gearing suitable for the Alps of Austria, Switzerland and southern France is not the best for the Low Countries, particularly for the network of fast roads which cover Holland.

This is, perhaps, the most general mechanical criticism I have heard. That it applies to continental cars also is of little comfort to our industry. We must offer a wide choice of gear ratios, while bearing in mind the growing mileage of fast motorways in all countries, even including Switzerland, which has brought forward a demand for over drive, which is expected, as an optional if need be, on the cheaper cars.

The continental driver often does journeys much longer than the British driver, and because of the network of motor-

ways can, and does, travel at fast speeds for hours on end. Nevertheless, he expects to climb the Alps in ease. The manufacturer who can offer a gear ratio, even a compromise, which enables him to do this has a potential customer.

Continental dwellers' holidays are longer than those of the British, and camping and picnicking are popular. It is not uncommon, during the summer months, to see five or six people jammed into a four-seater with everything but the kitchen stove lashed on top or behind. Consequently there is a persistent cry for more luggage space. This, of course, goes for continental cars as well, but here I am concerned with British cars. Our sports cars would sell in greater numbers if more than a weekend case could be carried. The two to three seaters go some way towards meeting this demand but not far enough.

Optional extras are frowned upon on the continent; heaters, demisters, screen-washers and headlamp flashers are all considered essential, and as part of the standard equipment. Continental manufacturers, such as Renault, forced the hands of Britain's car manufacturers in this respect, but the present British tendency of producing a standard model without these essentials and a de luxe version with them is disliked in Europe.

Safety belts and harnesses are compulsory in some countries and officially encouraged in others. They are expected to be standard equipment in these countries. Again certain colours are favoured in some countries more than in others. It should not be difficult for British manufacturers to know this, but I have heard of cases where new cars have been re-sprayed to a popular colour because our manufacturers have sent cars of the wrong colour for that particular country.

Finally one still hears the old, old story of bad after-sales service, of lack of spares and of too few accredited repairers. Before anyone rushes forward to claim that these matters have been put right let me assure you that I have checked these stories time and again. As late as June this year I found justifiable complaints on these grounds in Holland, Germany and Switzerland as well as in Belgium and Luxembourg.

In case it is thought that this article is "sour grapes", I would point out that when one asks about something, one invariably receives the complaints and bad points rather than the praises. I have tried to summarize what has been told to me, and I pass on the information in the belief that the customer is always right.

In spite of my criticisms there is a whole lot of goodwill and enthusiasm for British cars, and a healthy market in Europe for any manufacturer who endeavours to meet local demands.