

Color Connection

As higher-performing base stocks and additives have evolved, the color of motor oils has become lighter. Compared with API Group I base oils, Group II, III, IV and V oils are relatively “whiter” in color, and lubricant blenders and marketers have moved to these molecules to produce a much lighter finished lubricant.

In advanced lube markets, where refills are done by service centers, many drivers do not see what is inside the bottle. By contrast, African consumers are more likely to top up their own oils. Brand and cost are not the only factors determining their perception of oil quality, but color and even odor play an important part in influencing buying choices. And they choose products that have the same color as old school, amber-hued lubricants.

To get that desirable hue, some African lube blenders add a dye to passenger car motor oils to mimic the traditional appearance and to lure buyers.

“The general perception of people, i.e. the layman, is that lubricants have always been a golden honey color

in appearance with a characteristic sulfur odor, which tells people that it’s a good quality product,” Mervin Naidu, sales and business development manager for South African petrochemicals and lubricants company Unichem Services Ltd., told *Lubes’n’Greases*.

Brand trust plays a factor, too. Consumers prefer to buy brand-name oils that they are familiar with, such as Castrol, Shell, Caltex and Total, Naidu explained. “There are cheaper options that are more affordable but are not recognized brands and hence the reluctance by these consumers to even try these products, not knowing how trustworthy the product is from a quality point of view,” he said. This is where color is a crucial marketing tool for blenders.

Other factors may lie behind this demand for a darker-colored lubricant, such as widespread counterfeiting or adulteration. In Nigeria, for example, the fake oil trade is said to have cost the economy a staggering 200 billion Naira (U.S. \$550 million), according to reports in the local media.



Duckhams is dyed green, recalling the color of classic British racing cars.

This can make it challenging for lubricants marketers to launch new, lighter-colored products in places where public confidence depends on familiar performance, cost and color.

“Users look at [pale] color and immediately think that there is something wrong with the product, i.e., it has no additives in it or it’s of poor quality, irrespective of what the label says, and would reject the product, particularly if it’s not a recognized brand,” said Naidu.

Color can make a significant impact on consumer decisions, whatever the

region or product. Surveys suggest almost 85 percent of people say one of the main reasons behind making a purchase is color.

Fuels and lubricants have long contained dyes for marketing, leak detection and theft prevention purposes. When Duckhams relaunched its lubricants for classic cars, it retained its former green color in the hopes it will recapture nostalgia for its world-famous oils. Royal Purple motor oils are purple, of course. If these two brands export to parts of Africa where color is king, they may want to consider going for a more traditional golden tint. □