Kombi Last Wishes
The “Unlaunch” of the Volkswagen Bus

How a campaign created to “unlaunch” one of Volkswagen’s most outdated vehicles reigned the passion for the brand in a market seduced by new brands and models.
Volkswagen was one of the first automakers to operate in Brazil. It manufactured the cars that introduced people of several generations to the pleasure of driving, democratized access to cars in the country and built a strong, friendly relationship with Brazilians.

But as time passed, Brazil achieved great economic growth, and with it came an invasion of new brands, models and technologies. The “good old Volkswagen” was losing its appeal. And the relationship between Brazilians and the brand started to lose its spark.

This is the story of how Volkswagen Brazil relied on the oldest vehicle in its portfolio to reignite the passion for the brand in a market seduced by new brands and models. It’s an account of how an unprecedented “unlaunch” campaign managed to shift paradigms and set Volkswagen apart from “ordinary” carmakers.
A relationship that was losing its spark
Volkswagen was the first automaker to come to Brazil and it quickly became part of the country’s culture. It democratized access to automobiles and taught many generations of Brazilians to drive, establishing a successful and long-lasting relationship with them.

But all of a sudden, Brazil became the next big thing. And for the first time ever, many Brazilians had access to an avalanche of new products.

With the automotive industry, it wasn’t any different. The domestic market saw an invasion of newcomers which rapidly started offering an array of new and highly appealing options to Brazilians.

With big news arriving at competitor’s dealers every week, the “good old Volkswagen” began to lose its appeal.

The relationship between Brazilians and the brand started losing its spark. And Volkswagen started losing relevance – and market share in Brazil.
A fatal blow

Volkswagen Kombi: The end of a motoring era

You can always hear a VW Kombi van coming before you can see it. Beauty, in the case of the Kombi, really is in the eye of the beholder - or the driver.

With the unmistakable sound of its air-cooled engine, if the Kombi ever had the motoring equivalent of sex, it has faded with age.
It was June 2013 when the news came: new Brazilian legislation would turn ABS and airbags into mandatory items starting in 2014. The old Kombi (which is what the Volkswagen Bus is called in Brazil), a project from the 1950s and the oldest vehicle in production in Brazil, couldn’t be adapted to include these features.

One of Volkswagen’s best-selling vehicles in Brazil would have to be discontinued for being too old. A remarkably defeat for a brand whose relationship with Brazilians had become somewhat boring, and which was losing appeal and market share.

To mark the discontinuation of the Kombi in Brazil, the only country in which it was still being produced in 2013, Volkswagen decided to launch the Last Edition, a special edition aimed at a few collectors, celebrating the end of the model in an inconspicuous way. But the “old Kombi” was still alive on Brazilian streets. Even after 50 years, it still was a leader in its class. Its absence certainly wouldn’t go unnoticed for the 25 thousand customers that bought a Kombi every year.

So how could we approach the discontinuation of a vehicle that places Volkswagen’s image in the past, but which would be missed by so many people?
A different point of view
While researching about the impact that the Kombi’s discontinuation would cause, we discovered that, on the one hand, while the Kombi Last Edition would lead people to see Volkswagen as an old-fashioned brand, on the other hand, the news that Volkswagen would stop producing the Kombi also led people to remember meaningful moments, demonstrating the deep relationship between Brazilians and Volkswagen.

Few cars were part of the lives of so many Brazilians like the Kombi. It’s virtually impossible to find a single Brazilian, of any given social class or age group, who doesn’t have a good story about the Kombi to tell. Whole families used to make a living with the help of a Kombi. Unforgettable trips have been — and still are — taken in that van.

For Brazilians, the Kombi was more than just a car: it was an old friend that brought smiles, good stories and conversations wherever it went. It wasn’t just “an old-fashioned vehicle” — it was a symbol of Volkswagen’s unique way of thinking its cars and relating with people.

That’s when we realized that, instead of reinforcing the image of an “old Volkswagen”, the Kombi could help us reignite the passion of Brazilians for the brand, placing it in a totally different position compared to other “ordinary” automakers.

“For Brazilians, the Kombi was more than just a car: it was an old friend that brought smiles, good stories and conversations wherever it went. It wasn’t just “an old-fashioned vehicle” — it was a symbol of Volkswagen’s unique way of thinking its cars and relating with people.”

“...the Kombi used to be my work vehicle. I met the mother of my children in a Kombi. I used to sell popcorn in a Kombi. I traveled around Brazil in a Kombi. And here I am today, with my good old Kombi.”
Roberto, Qualitative Research, July 2013

“We named it Maristela. When my father sold it, we cried as if we had lost a dog or something.”
Marcia, Qualitative Research, July 2013

“...I went to school and grew up in a Kombi. At home, we used to make a living with the help of a Kombi. And I still do that today. I tell people, see that Kombi over there? My No is in that Kombi.”
Fernando, Qualitative Research, July 2013

“...There are lots of people traveling around in big motorhomes or SUVs that run on diesel, like the Toyota Hilux. These are good vehicles. The difference is that the Kombi grabs everyone’s attention wherever it goes. It opens doors and puts smiles on people’s faces.”
Jason Rhein, “O Globo” newspaper, 12/5/2013
An “unlaunch” and reconquer project
Instead of going for an inconspicuous goodbye, selling the last units of the Kombi through a hot site, we decided to spread the word about the vehicle’s retirement through an unprecedented “unlaunch” campaign.

In this campaign, the Kombi would do more than just saying goodbye: it would show its gratitude to Brazilians for the great amount of beautiful stories and smiles they shared together. Instead of highlighting Volkswagen’s lack of innovation, the “unlaunch of the Kombi” would celebrate the friendship between the Volkswagen brand and Brazilians. Our goal was to truly win over the hearts of Brazilian customers and to restore a beautiful relationship that had been eroded by monotony.
An “unlaunch” and reconquer project

The “unlaunch of the Kombi” was carried out in stages. First, a print ad communicated the discontinuation of the Kombi and invited people to share their stories with the model through a hot site.

Thousands of Brazilians spontaneously shared touching memories. People who had been born in a Kombi, couples who had met for the first time in a Kombi, and even people who had literally traveled around the world in a Kombi.

Then, the best stories became part of the “Kombi’s will”, which was then published in magazines and newspapers without prior notice. In its will, the Kombi announced as its heirs the authors of the best stories that had been published on the website. It also announced what it would leave in return for all the love and friendship it got from these amazing people:
A Kombi hubcap autographed by Pelé to Seu Nenê, who went to several World Cups in a Kombi.

A brand new miniature blue Kombi to Valdir, who had lost its first toy, a miniature just like that, when he was a kid.

A Kombi odometer with the longest possible traveled distance (999,999) to Franck and Iris, who literally traveled around the world in a Kombi.
Kombi-shaped ravioli cutters to Rolando, who changed his life when he turned his first Kombi into an Italian restaurant.

A replica of the Kombi’s first sketches to Mirian, who was born in a Kombi.

And finally, the Kombi actually visited its heirs to deliver their inheritance. Its last farewell became an online mini-documentary about the model’s last wishes, among which was to reunite with its “brother” Ben Pon Jr., son of the man who designed the Kombi.
The unlaunch campaign did more than expressing the Kombi’s gratitude to its heirs – it left a legacy to Volkswagen by reigniting the relationship between Brazilians and the brand.

After the campaign, Volkswagen moved up 5 positions in terms of Proximity and consolidated its leading position in terms of Brand Empathy (source: Brand Tracking GMI – Q1 2014).

The campaign generated a large amount of spontaneous mentions in some of Brazil’s most relevant media vehicles. With a media investment of only US$ 580 thousand, we generated US$ 7 million in earned media and impacted more than 35 million people.
In five days, the documentary “The Kombi’s Last Wishes” had over 1 million views, was added into the YouTube Trends Playlist and became one of the five most viral campaigns of the week, according to BrandMagz. The level of engagement generated by the campaign – a priceless asset – was also incredibly positive.

This could be noticed on social media:

- Out of 10 thousand posts related to the campaign on Facebook and Twitter, 93% were positive comments.
- Out of 30 thousand evaluations on YouTube, 98.8% were positive.

The “unlaunch campaign” for the Kombi was also awarded with 7 Lions in the Cannes Creativity Festival.

I liked the fact that Volkswagen thought about creating a will, sending gifts to people, having a closer contact with people. We’re all in need of that.

Tatiana, qualitative research

This is such a touching video. You can see that this isn’t the kind of brand that will go unnoticed, or that people will soon forget.

Adriana, qualitative research

I have no words. If you know my life story, you know I’m not kidding here. For everything you’ve done for me and my family, Thank you Volkswagen.

Fernando, qualitative research

Social Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Polarity of Reviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>93% 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>98.8% 1.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Henrique
C’mon Volkswagen... Why would you want to make us cry on a Saturday night? LOL this is amazing. Congratulations to whoever created this beautiful tribute to the good old Bus! I have to admit I cried.

Marcos
I’ve loved VW ever since I was a kid and when I saw this video, my eyes just filled with tears. This is simply amazing. Congratulations VW, and congratulations VW Bus, my eternal love!

Rodrigo
I never thought I’d be so touched by a video about a car. Kudos for Volkswagen!
Results

While new news was brought by competitors every week, Volkswagen was the brand that really caught people’s interest. It accomplished this with the “good old Kombi”, that no longer seemed to be able of helping the brand in the highly competitive Brazilian market.

The unprecedented “unlaunch campaign” for the Kombi ended up reigniting the passion of Brazilians for the Volkswagen brand. And did for the brand something that not even the most innovative launches and features could achieve.