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Borrowing From the 7 Pays Dividends for the 5

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LIFE seems too easy for BMW: just slap the blue-and-white roundel badge on any car in sight, give a taste to the speed addicts of the auto press and voilà! — lawyers, TV producers and dermatologists all across America write checks faster than the human knee can jerk.

It's not hard to spot these badge-obsessed BMW buyers — stroll the parking lot of any designer-eyewear boutique — who one suspects will never send their tachometer needle to the far end of the scale. Some people, including my wife, resist BMW's charms precisely for that weighty social baggage.

Yet I'll argue (and argue) that, like a rock band, BMW cannot choose its audience. It's naïve to blame an automaker for having the ambition, talent and yes, image, to make that audience as big as possible.

There's certainly nothing flashy or superficial about the redesigned 5 Series, the midsize sedan that, according to the company, delivers half its profits worldwide. If anything, the car is as sober as a German math professor, its electronic brain spinning with formulas and algorithms that lay users will never grasp. Yet a driver can rest assured that the numbers have been proofed by Doktor Bimmer.

I first met the 2011 5 Series at New Jersey Motorsports Park, about an hour west of Atlantic City, where BMW had assembled most of its model range for hot laps on the track and for

countryside cruising.

Sports writers talk about consistency as a measure of greatness. And as obnoxious as routine winning can be to fans of the underdog — ask anyone who despises the Yankees — BMW can claim a similarly consistent lineup and lineage. In the true test of a big-leaguer, every model feels at home on the racetrack, from the scrappy 1 Series coupe to a comically beefy slugger like the X6 crossover. And every BMW model has a consistent feel and aura of command.

The new 5 displays all those champion's tendencies, along with some weaknesses: a sense of aloofness in some situations (aggravated by its new electric power steering) and an inclination to show off its technical prowess.

The 5 Series' perennial task is to bridge the gap — in size, price, sportiness and luxury — between the sprightly 3 Series and the big-and-rich 7 Series. Sharing a stellar chassis with the latest 7 Series, the new 5 leans in that luxurious direction, literally: the mildly stretched 5 Series is just 6.9 inches shorter than the 750i but 14 inches longer than the 3 sedan. Not surprisingly, the 5 drives more like a scaled-down 7 than a scaled-up 3.

Traditionalists can certainly cheer the redrawn styling, with its combed-back cabin and 3.2-inch-longer wheelbase. Though it's not entirely accurate to argue, as many auto writers have, that the 5 simply attended BMW's re-education camp, at which inmates are forced to renounce all memory of Chris Bangle, the wave-making chief designer who left the company in 2009.

Adrian van Hooydonk, the Bangle disciple who directed the 5's styling, certainly hasn't disavowed his master. From any angle, the new 5 displays the "flame surfacing" — a tense battle between concave and convex shapes, influenced by the architect [Frank Gehry](#) — that made Mr. Bangle the world's most influential and controversial car designer. Metallic waves lap and crest along the complex hood, floating a surfboard-shaped center section fronted by the BMW logo. A rising character line carves a pronounced ledge along the body sides, and at the rear the decklid rises to form a graceful pseudo-spoiler.

The result is a muscular Teutonic coach that reconciles Bangle's bold modernism with BMW's still-appealing conservatism: the 5 is the bartender at the private club who knows exactly what you're having, and it's not pink and fizzy.

The familiarity extends into the lovely cabin, which evokes both luxury and pure functionality without seeming to lift a pinkie to exert itself. Highlights include a no-nonsense black-panel instrument display; a knockout 10.2-inch, high-resolution screen for the optional navigation system; and an especially comfortable back seat, with a touch more knee room than before. Starting at \$50,475, the popular 535i model gets the company's new 3-liter single-turbo in-line 6, with 300 horsepower and 300 pound-feet of torque. That 535i is good for a factory-estimated scoot from 0 to 60 miles per hour in 5.7 seconds.

For \$60,575, the 550i cuts that time to 5 seconds flat by calling on the 7 Series' 400-horse twin-turbocharged 4.4-liter V-8. Strivers can also have a 528i for \$45,425, as long as your motive standards are met by a 240-horsepower in-line 6.

Those engines are bolted to the 7 Series' 8-speed automatic transmission that keeps the engines in their sweet spot so unobtrusively some enthusiasts may pine for more noise or drama. As for any suggestions that the BMW has sold its sporty soul, recall that the 5 Series is the only car in its class to offer a manual transmission.

The automatic transmission's downside is the wand-shaped console lever that can leave a driver red-faced with its tendency to ignore commands to engage drive or reverse from a stop. More than once, I found myself racing the engine in neutral, feeling like a jerk, while a patronizing dashboard message reminded me to "Press unlock button to select gear."

The BMW's technical portfolio does celebrate the Rise of the Machines, mostly for good but also for ill. The gadgets, virtually all of them optional and expensive, include Driving Dynamics Control from the 7 Series: its settings, from Comfort to the sharp-edged Sport Plus, adjust the active suspension, transmission, throttle and stability-control programs to the driver's whims. Active Roll Stabilization keeps the BMW flatter than a Marine's buzz cut through the corners.

The Top View system's onboard cameras create a virtual 360-degree view around the car, with more candid cameras in the front bumper to peer around sharp corners. The adaptive cruise control now works even in stop-and-go traffic. Buyers can have lane departure and blind spot warnings, and a sort of digital valet that tells you whether a parking spot is big enough for the car. But the Night Vision system with pedestrian detection is the acme of superfluous options.

More reliably, active four-wheel-steering improves high-speed composure while trimming 19 inches from the car's turning circle. The system tweaks the steering ratio for easier parking and improved maneuverability.

And that, believe me, is the Cliffs Notes version of a car whose technical intricacies could make [Stephen Hawking](#) break out in a sweat.

Between the discreet transmission and the somewhat icy steering, the 5 Series does reveal a bit of the synthetic, autopilot tendency that I dislike in the 6 Series coupe and convertible.

For those truly determined to shred the BMW's civilized veneer and find the hooligan underneath, a new M5 arrives next year. That high-performance version is said to develop more than 550 horsepower — up from 500 of the current V-10 model — with a twin-turbo V-8.

Even the mildly uncommunicative helm didn't prevent the 5 from turning impressive racetrack laps or from gulping huge helpings of twisting curves on public roads. Crank the BMW to its Sport Plus chassis setting, and it's hard to imagine anything in this class outrunning a 550i with a manual transmission. Facing a 1,000-mile journey and given a choice of any car in this fiercely competitive segment — [Jaguar XF](#), Mercedes E-Class, Infiniti M, [Audi A6](#) — I'd grab the BMW's chunky key fob and never let go.

Yes, some people buy a BMW for the badge. But the real prestige of the 5 Series, and its continuing superiority, has nothing to do with the badge, and everything to do with what's inside.

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INSIDE TRACK: Still the Fab Five.