

Fiat Chrysler's local boss wants car maker to claim central place in SA market

As a leading global motor company, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles could no longer afford to remain a peripheral player in the South African new-vehicle market, new local CEO [Robin van Rensburg](#) said on Thursday.



Van Rensburg, who took charge this month, said with the exception of Jeep, the company's brands were underachievers in SA. With two of these brands likely to quietly leave the country in coming weeks, those remaining had to significantly improve their market share.

He predicted the arrival of new products would kick-start this recovery.

Fiat was an important brand in the 1990s when the little Uno transformed the entry-level car market. In those days, Fiat sold cars in SA by the thousand. Now it does so by the dozen; all that is available is the Fiat 500 range. The sporty Alfa Romeo and Abarth brands also sell slowly.

On the Chrysler side of the business, the Chrysler and Dodge car brands are on the verge of discreetly quitting SA, once current stocks are exhausted. Neither has made much of an impact here and, in any case, most vehicles are designed for markets where motorists drive on the right-hand side of the road.

That leaves Jeep, which remains a popular brand in SA. But Van Rensburg said it could do much better. "Wrangler has a

cult following so we should be doing more with that."

The Cherokee would benefit from more diesel engines while the Grand Cherokee luxury 4x4 should compete more aggressively against the Land Rover Discovery.

New CEO Van Rensburg joined Fiat Chrysler SA from Jaguar Land Rover SA, where he was marketing director until the end of 2016.

Fiat Chrysler, created in 2014, is the world's seventh largest car maker. As a group it is little known in SA, where many are more familiar with Daimler Chrysler, even though that merger unravelled a decade ago, in 2007. "The vehicle brands are the most important but we also need to raise awareness of ourselves as a corporate entity," Van Rensburg said.

One way to do this could be to build vehicles in SA, he said. After the early days of the Uno, when it was built by Nissan SA in Pretoria, Fiats have been imported. While there was no guarantee of it happening, Van Rensburg said he was investigating the feasibility of local manufacture, as a means of "demonstrating our commitment to SA".

If Fiat Chrysler were to build in SA, it would not necessarily be cars. Fiat professional light commercial vehicles, including vans and the Fullback pick-up, also had potential to sell many more than at present, he said. "I don't think we have understood the potential in that segment."

Van Rensburg succeeds Marco Melani, who became CEO last March but returned to group headquarters in Turin, Italy, at the end of 2016. Melani's appointment, following the departure of long-serving Trent Barcroft, was intended as a stopgap, Van Rensburg said.

"The plan was always for the company to be run by a local."

Source: Business Day

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