

BRAD WILLIAMS

Ready For Prime Time

story by **HILDA J. BRUCKER** photo by **TIM MANTOANI**

Brad Williams literally grew up in the tire business. His family still owns the retail establishment they've run since he was a kid in small-town Louisiana, and Williams himself is now in Georgia, working for tire-giant Maxxis International. At first glance it might seem like the apple didn't fall far from the tree, yet Williams is also a bit of a prodigal son, driven by a certain amount of restlessness. "That's probably why I'm not running the family business; I kind of did go another way," he says with a laugh and just the barest trace of a Southern drawl. "I mean, I stayed in the tire industry, but I am definitely doing my own thing."

In his current position with Maxxis, Williams' key role is to develop strategic sponsorships of professional off-road drivers, teams and events. These sponsorships, along with endorsements from the pros, have been the backbone of Maxxis' off-road marketing efforts the past several years. "Relatively speaking, Maxxis is somewhat of a new name in the off-road industry in the United States. We didn't do a whole lot of advertising until about five years ago. Before that, we didn't really run ads in consumer magazines, so it appears we came on the scene quickly here, but we're bigger than people think."

The Cheng Shin Rubber Co. Maxxis represents is one of the world's largest tire companies, with its full product line encompassing rubber for bicycles, ATVs, trucks, passenger cars, motorcycles as well as agricultural and industrial vehicles. But according to Williams, the core business in the United States is light-truck and passenger vehicles, and the brand holds special appeal for the off-road consumer. "We've always been known for the toughness of our product, mainly our sidewall strength. Since it was going to

be the premium line, we weren't going to cut any corners. We wanted it to be a top-tier tire. We never went after that cheaper market."

BUILDING BRAND RECOGNITION

Thanks to the sponsorship programs, Maxxis is now a brand name that's easily recognized by anyone who watches motorsports on television, particularly the specialty channels that have proliferated on satellite TV in

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recent years. Williams has expanded the program to where Maxxis is sponsoring over 40 drivers and teams in rock crawling, desert racing and even short-course racing. Maxxis has also garnered extensive exposure by sponsoring entire events, lending its own name to televised series like the Maxxis XRRR, coordinated by the Xtreme Rock Racing Association.

Individual drivers are also featured in print advertising campaigns, and Williams says the marketing strategy has been effective. "Recruiting the right drivers is important. Everyone who endorses our product is actually using our product," he stresses.

"We've found when we get the right drivers plugging our line, a lot of the grassroots guys are going to

want to use the same product. Our message is, if the tire is tough enough to handle the stuff these professionals are putting it through, then surely it's strong enough for your average weekend warrior." And Williams doesn't discount the value of word-of-mouth advertising, either. "On the Internet forums, word gets around pretty quickly when someone has a tire that's working and that's holding up well for your weekend warrior-type off-roaders."

EYE-CATCHING AGGRESSION

Despite the Maxxis reputation for rugged strength, Williams recognizes the need for aesthetic appeal in addition to high performance. He sees the overall design of Maxxis tires as an indispensable blend of form and function. "In the off-road market, people will pay more if it's the look they want," he says. "These vehicles are their toys. For many people it may not even be their everyday vehicle, so they want the right look—they want to put on the fancy wheels." He describes the Maxxis overall design strategy for its off-road products as "a very aggressive look for extreme off-road, with aggressive shoulders and also aggressive voids."

Williams cites the Maxxis Trepador radial tire as a true innovation for the company. "In the past, all extreme off-road has been bias ply. So this will be our first extreme, super-aggressive radial, and we're set to come out with the bigger sizes. The main thing is the true three-ply sidewall—this is top, premium-brand technology." **ORB**

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