Tariffs Impact Hyundai and Nissan’s Ad Plans, But It’s Business As Usual for Kia

On March 26, President Donald Trump announced a 25% tariff on imported automobiles and specific automobile parts. Now, with a potential reprieve in sight, brands including Hyundai and Nissan have revealed how their marketing departments are navigating the uncertainty.

The levy went into effect on April 3 and applies to imported passenger vehicles and light trucks such as sedans, sport utility vehicles (SUVs), and minivans, as well as parts like engines and transmissions.

However, the imposed auto tariffs have not come without whiplash, and Trump suggested on Monday (April 14) that he is considering a temporary pause to give automakers time to adjust their supply chains.

Amid the chaos, automakers are still bracing for potential price hikes and lower sales; some, including Ford and Hyundai, have temporarily locked prices to reassure consumers.

On the ground at the 2025 New York International Auto Show, ADWEEK spoke with Hyundai, Nissan, and Kia’s top marketers to discuss their marketing strategies amid tariff uncertainty.

Sean Gilpin, CMO, Hyundai Motor America

On April 11, Hyundai launched a promotion ensuring buyers who purchase or lease any new vehicle by June 2 will see no increase in the manufacturer’s suggested retail price (MSRP).

The Korean car marque was one of the few brands, alongside Ford, to directly address the tariff situation with an ad

developed by its AOR, Innocean.

The “The Hyundai Way” campaign underscores Hyundai’s commitment to U.S. customers.

“It was a message of assurance to give [customers] confidence,” Gilpin, who was elevated to Hyundai’s CMO in August 2024, told ADWEEK. “When we surveyed customers, we saw that [they] didn’t exactly know how a tariff works, but were concerned that tariffs were going to make things more expensive.”

He said the brand has already seen positive results from wading into the tariff conversation, with browsing activity on its dealer website up 20% to 30% in the aftermath.

“The Hyundai Way” will run over the next several weeks across national TV, digital, social, sports programming like the NBA Playoffs, MLB regular season, and PGA Golf Tournaments, and through audio sponsorships with podcast and streaming partners.

Forecasters have been cutting their ad spend projections for the year, including Magna, which lowered its U.S. outlook by 0.6% in March—but Gilpin doesn’t believe auto tariffs will impact Hyundai’s media budget.

The business has primarily invested in media channels like broadcast TV, revolving around Sunday Night Football, and its planning to double down on this strategy. Gilpin said Hyundai will also activate around other sports programming, including NBA broadcasts and the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

“We’re not looking at [tariffs] as an impact on our sales ambitions or our brand growth, so we’re going to continue to invest as planned,” he said.

Hyundai reported a 7.7% year-over-year sales increase for 2024, with revenues hitting $123.7 million.

Allyson Witherspoon, CMO, Nissan U.S.

Witherspoon, who became the brand's U.S. CMO in November 2024, said that after the election, Nissan saw an uptick in consumers searching for the price of its vehicles, triggered by concerns around Trump's economic policies.

These insights, along with pending auto tariffs, led Nissan to lower the price of its Rogue and Pathfinder models earlier this month, both of which, it predicts, will see an increase in sales in Q2 2025 due to the discount.

The brand is also shifting some of its marketing focus and messaging to support its U.S.-based vehicles, reinforcing that more than 50% of its manufacturing occurs in the U.S.

"We've always been about trying to provide the right types of vehicles with the technology that consumers are looking for, but at an accessible price point," said Witherspoon. "The tariff piece created a competitive advantage."

Following a failed merger with Honda and a subsequent CEO switch, Nissan has been souping up its vehicles, like the electric Leaf model and mid-size Murano SUV, as part of a bigger brand turnaround.

For Q1 2025, Nissan reported that sales for the Leaf were up 103.4% year-over-year, while sales for the Murano were up 84.1% year-over-year.

Right now, the exec said that she doesn't see tariffs affecting Nissan's advertising budget for the rest of 2025, some of which is divided between upcoming campaigns for its Rogue, Leaf, and Sentra models. However, she acknowledged that this could change as the situation is "very dynamic."

Russell Wager, CMO, KIA America

Unlike Hyundai and Nissan, Kia is waiting for more certainty around the long-term plan for tariffs.

As auto tariffs take effect, the exec said that the brand has not shifted any of its marketing or messaging amidst economic uncertainties. He also pointed out that March was a record-high month for sales year-over-year—however, he did not disclose a figure.

Wager joined KIA in 2019 ahead of its 2021 rebrand that included a new logo, colors, and slogan to align with a focus on electric and hybrid vehicles. Since then, KIA has expanded its product portfolio with models like the EV6, K4, and Sportage, leading to a 50% increase in overall sales to date, said the exec.

In January, KIA reported its highest annual global sales with 3.1 million units sold in 2024. The brand's total revenue also increased by 7.7% year-over-year at $75.8 billion and its targeting global sales of 3.22 million units for 2025.

When it comes to its ad spend, KIA plans no major change and is "following where the consumers are," which has led it to shift from linear TV and digital to streaming TV, connected TV, and social media, Wager said.

"Each year we are evaluating all of the channels and making sure eyeballs are in places that we're talking," said Wager. "If not, we increase, and if some of them are going away, then we decrease."

Given its hefty supply of inventory already in the U.S, Wager shared that KIA can "almost" get through June without succumbing to tariffs. Five of its most important

vehicles—Telluride, Sorento, Sportage, EV9, and EV6—are all made at its plant in West Point, Ga.

“Until there is definitive direction on where things will go, whether tariffs are [temporary or] permanent, we’re still having to build a brand and drive traffic,” the exec said. “We haven’t changed anything as of right now.”

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