

For Tesla Owners, a Referendum Through Bumper Stickers

in News



It was the last week of October, with the election fast approaching, and business was booming for Matthew Hiller. His Etsy shop was receiving hundreds of orders per day. He was preparing to leave for vacation in France, and was hoping that while he was away Elon Musk wouldn't do anything "particularly crazy."

It may seem strange, but every time Mr. Musk, the Tesla chief executive, causes a stir, Mr. Hiller has to fulfill orders for his online shops. The most popular of the items that he sells? Bumper stickers that say, in all-caps, "I Bought This Before We Knew Elon Was Crazy."

For his vacation, Mr. Hiller asked a friend to cover for him. "I don't know how she's going to manage this," he said. With Mr. Musk frequenting rallies in support of Donald J. Trump and posting on X relentlessly at the time, Mr. Hiller was dubious that business would

slow. He had no idea that things were about to get far more hectic with Mr. Trump's winning the presidential election and Mr. Musk's status as his close ally.

Mr. Musk [spent more than \\$250 million on the 2024 election](#), according to federal filings, and then immediately stepped in as [a key part of Mr. Trump's transition team](#). Few business executives are as closely associated with their products as Mr. Musk, so his rise in the world of far-right politics led to plenty of celebration among Trump-supporting Tesla owners, but plenty of consternation among those who disagreed with the move, or who had simply grown tired of Mr. Musk.

The solution, for many Tesla owners on both ends of that spectrum, has been to slap a bumper sticker on their car to let people know how they feel about Mr. Musk.

Mr. Hiller, who lives in Honolulu and works at the Waikiki Aquarium, became a key player in the situation by being ahead of the curve thanks to his side business: an Etsy shop called Mad Puffer Stickers.

At first, Mr. Hiller just sold stickers with fish illustrations (e.g. an image of a clownfish with the caption "Don't talk to me. I'm a fishtrovert") on Etsy and Amazon. He had been considering buying a Tesla, but in early 2023, several months after Mr. Musk completed his takeover of Twitter, Mr. Hiller said he found himself alienated by what he characterized as misinformation on the site.

"So I'm like, there's no way I'm buying a Tesla: I don't want to give this guy a penny," he said. "Then I started thinking, there's got to be so many people who are just embarrassed, who have a Tesla already, and they're like, 'Oh my god, now I'm repping this guy. I don't want to endorse anything this guy stands for.'"

That is when he added the new bumper sticker — "I Bought This Before We Knew Elon Was Crazy" — to his offerings, aiming to draw in left-leaning Tesla owners. Initially, he sold between five and 10 of the stickers a day. But as Mr. Musk became increasingly outspoken in his support of Mr. Trump, more orders started to flow in, with Mr. Hiller reporting he has sold around 18,000 of the stickers across 30 countries.

"It's become a pretty good side business," Mr. Hiller said.

The situation turned into an opportunity for supporters of Mr. Musk as well, with multiple pro-Musk bumper stickers surfacing, including one that seemed to be [a direct response to Mr. Hiller's](#) that reads "I bought this after I knew Elon was awesome."

Among the customers for that sticker was Sean Ziese, who runs a machine shop in eastern Oklahoma.

"I've always been against E.V.s. — the oil patch is what puts food on my family's table," Mr. Ziese said. "During the Republican National Convention, Trump said that Elon is going to start supporting conservatives. I told my wife, 'If Elon is going to start

supporting conservatives and free speech, I'm going to start supporting Elon, even though I hate E.V.s."

So he bought a Cybertruck and added the "awesome" sticker. It has become his favorite car.

It is a situation fairly unique to Tesla that the company's products are viewed, by some, as a direct endorsement of the company's chief executive. Buying an Amazon Kindle does not necessarily signify that you're a Jeff Bezos fan. And less than a decade ago, being a Tesla owner didn't necessarily imply an endorsement of Mr. Musk's public persona as much as it signaled an interest in electric cars, a fair amount of disposable income and a concern about climate change.

It is not possible to know the overall impact of Mr. Musk's political messaging on how Teslas are perceived by their owners. But his [sharp pivot to the right](#) was cited as a potential factor for a slump in sales earlier this year, and a vocal group of Tesla owners, like Mr. Hiller's customers, has become self-conscious about the cars. For them, the anti-Musk bumper stickers allow them to create a distance from the company's chief executive without actually selling their vehicle.

Brian Esola, a paralegal and real estate agent who lives on City Island in the Bronx, identifies as an "independent with left-leaning ideologies." He purchased a Tesla in April, but began to feel uneasy about the implied association with Mr. Musk.

"I appreciate what he does occasionally in his business endeavors, but from a personal perspective, and from his words and attributes and actions, I just could not support him," Mr. Esola said. So he purchased a sticker from Mr. Hiller's Etsy shop that said, "Anti Elon Tesla Club."

Morgan Ames, a professor of data science at the University of California, Berkeley, purchased her first Tesla in 2013. Four years later, after she had her second child, she bought another one to accommodate her growing family.

"Even in 2017, we were definitely uncomfortable with some of the more outrageous. It was the last week of October, with the election fast approaching, and business was booming for Matthew Hiller. His Etsy shop was receiving hundreds of orders per day. He was preparing to leave for vacation in France, and was hoping that while he was away Elon Musk wouldn't do anything "particularly crazy."

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“Even in 2017, we were definitely uncomfortable with some of the more outrageous stuff Elon Musk was saying in the news,” Ms. Ames said. She nevertheless doubled down on her Tesla ownership because she couldn’t find other electric cars that matched Tesla’s capabilities.

After Mr. Musk’s association with Mr. Trump became impossible to ignore, Ms. Ames printed a bumper sticker for her Tesla that said, “Shut up, Elon Musk.” She briefly sold them on the online marketplace Zazzle, but said her shop was removed after complaints. Nowadays, any time someone compliments her sticker, she gives them one. stuff Elon Musk was saying in the news,” Ms. Ames said. She nevertheless doubled down on her Tesla ownership because she couldn’t find other electric cars that matched Tesla’s capabilities.

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