

CHRYSLER

Ready to hold its own

It's 10 years since Chrysler returned to SA. But for David Elmore and his marketing team, 2008 is a new start. Within months of Chrysler's arrival, Daimler-Benz bought the American carmaker. Since then it has been managed locally as a division of DaimlerChrysler.

Now Chrysler SA MD Elmore and his team must establish the company — and its Chrysler, Jeep and Dodge brands — as an independent operation.

It won't be entirely on its own. Mercedes-Benz SA (MBSA) will continue to run finance and administrative services.

He is confident about the company's prospects. In an overall new-vehicle market down nearly 10% in 2007, Chrysler's SA sales were up 16%. Jeep is doing well. The Dodge, a relative latecomer to the SA market, and Chrysler brands are proving popular among black buyers.

Elmore says customers will experience little difference as a result of Chrysler SA's independence. "There are a lot of customers that have never made the connection between Daimler and Chrysler. In five years, the whole separation issue will be forgotten," he says. "Chrysler will be established here as it is in other countries."

The main effect of the change will be felt by Chrysler SA itself. Elmore now deals direct with Chrysler group headquarters in Auburn Hills, Michigan, rather than through Mercedes-Benz SA.

"Chrysler generally reacts more quickly than DaimlerChrysler used to," he says. That means potentially more product flexibility. It certainly means more marketing flexibility.

SA is Chrysler's 10th-biggest international market outside North America.

The marriage between Daimler and Chrysler never achieved the heights promised by its creators. Despite numerous crises along the way, Elmore says the relationship has left Chrysler a lasting legacy. "The quality that Daimler put in our vehicles is tremendous. The difference in quality between then and now is the difference between night and day." ■