

# F1: Petronas hint Mercedes deal may not be all it's cracked up to be

As Mercedes GP Petronas roll out their new car and star driver, Malaysian oil company Petronas has come in for criticism for its high-profile sponsorship of the team. Its response raises as many questions as it answers.

Ahmad Nizam Salleh yesterday told reporters that the sponsorship cost was much lower than it would have been with some other teams.

In Stuttgart, he did not say the obvious: you are all here because Michael Schumacher is standing up with the Petronas name in big letters right across his chest.

Mercedes made it plain that they would run a cost-averse team, and Brawn proved he could run a team for less than other manufacturers were running away from.

Ahmad, similarly, did not say that the Petronas logo, prominently displayed on Motorcycling ace Valentino Rossi's backside demonstrated that the company has the knack of getting its logo exactly where the camera is pointed for a significant part of the time.

And, in particular, he did not tell the critics to do their research before asking stupid questions or making crass allegations.

Instead he spoke in corporate speak: "the opportunity enable[s] us to meet our business targets," he said.

But then came a comment that will spook the Mercedes team - "We will review the sponsorship from year to year for the next five years of the deal."

Mercedes GP was proud to announce a five year sponsorship deal the day before Schumacher joined them. There was no hint that there were contingencies. In fact, it was presented as a solid, done, five year deal.

Ahmad, who seems to have a somewhat odd grasp of Formula One history if Malaysian national news agency Bernama got its facts right, clearly doesn't consider the deal entirely rock solid.

And as for history? Bernama says that Ahmad said "Mercedes had chosen Mercedes over BMW Sauber, Williams and Lotus based on its vast experience in F1."

Assuming they meant to say Petronas had chosen Mercedes, that still leaves the odd comment that the team has more Formula One experience than BMW Sauber or Williams. Even taking it back to the original days of BAR, that's not so either in terms of chassis or engines. The last time Mercedes entered a team - which in F1 terms means using its own chassis - was more than half a century ago.

Petronas has been criticised for choosing to sponsor Mercedes instead of Lotus - some have said it is unpatriotic for Lotus road cars and Lotus Engineering are owned by Malaysian state car company Proton and have been very influential in developing a range of inexpensive cars that have both good handling and good engines. Team Lotus, the F1 team, is owned by Tony Fernandez, a former management consultant who, through an investment vehicle Tune Air took over failed state-owned airline Air Asia and turned it into a successful budget carrier.

Malaysians are getting behind Team Lotus in a big way but domestically Petronas is already the dominant player in a price-controlled petrol, oil and gas market. And the world's media has been orgiastic about Schumacher's return to F1. From a commercial point of view, to attract attention to the brand internationally, there was no deal for Petronas that would come close to the deal they have done.

Ahmad was being too polite. The correct answer to the criticism is "don't ask juvenile questions: think before you speak."