

Cars Look the Same? Blame Federal Rules

By DEE-ANN DURBIN
AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — When Jim Mattison was growing up in the early 1950s, he remembers visiting Detroit car dealerships with his family each fall to check out the new models. By the time he was in kindergarten, he could name any car's make and model just by looking at the hubcaps.

"At 60 miles an hour and 60 feet away, you could identify a Chrysler from a Ford from a DeSoto," said Mattison, who spent his career in the auto industry and now runs a Pontiac archive.

These days, even Mattison has trouble telling one brand from another. Government regulations, increased competition and profit-squeezed carmakers have filled the streets with bland look-alikes. With the cost of developing a new car easily climbing to \$1 billion, automakers are loathe to take risks.

Having trouble distinguishing a Civic from a Sentra, or even a Kia from a Mercedes? Here are some of the reasons why:

- Government regulations. Seat belts, air bags and crash-test standards have all left their mark on vehicle design. And as automakers sell more cars globally, they also have to consider European and Asian regulations. Pedestrian protection standards in Europe, for example, require that cars be made to hit the upper and lower body at the same time, so a victim is more likely to bounce onto the hood. That forces designers to include tall, chunky bumpers, like those on the new Volkswagen Jetta and Ford Focus.

"You can have different tail lights and headlights, but you don't have the level of flexibility that somebody might really like to have on a pure design standpoint, and you certainly have less of it than you had in the past," said David Cole, chairman of the Center for Automotive Research in Ann Arbor.

- Fuel economy. Government fuel economy standards are rising, and so are consumers' expectations for fuel efficiency.

Thirty miles per gallon was impressive a decade ago; now automakers are routinely making small cars that get 40 mpg or higher.

As the emphasis on fuel economy grows, so does the focus on aerodynamics. The 2013 versions of the Ford Escape and Nissan Pathfinder both ditched their boxy, wind-resistant rooflines for ones that sweep back and flow with the air. Car companies are also building vehicles closer to the ground, changing grilles and tweaking side mirrors to save a

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few-tenths of a gallon.

"There's only one good way through the wind. You can't have a wide variety of shapes and have them be aerodynamically correct," said Jack Nead, editorial director of *Kelley Blue Book*.

- Insular design world. Designers go to the same auto shows, read the same design magazines and, for the most part, attend a handful of schools. Popular designs are quickly copied. Chrysler's retro PT Cruiser was followed a few years later by the Chevrolet HHR. The boxy Nissan Cube and Kia Soul channel the Scion xB.

"It's really a very conservative profession," said Imre Molnar, dean of Detroit's Center for Creative Studies, a design school.

- Cost. Automakers have to sell enough vehicles to offset the costs of developing and producing them. After a string of tough years — from General Motors' and Chrysler's government bailouts during the recession to Toyota's and Honda's troubles after last year's earthquake in Japan — car

companies don't want to invest in something that might flop.

Still, distinctive design — even if it's polarizing — can pay dividends. Ed Welburn, vice president for global design at GM, says the angular styling of Cadillac's new sedans got a sharply divided reaction in consumer focus groups a decade ago. But GM embraced it anyway, knowing it would stand out. Sales took off.

Risky design also put Hyundai on the map with the 2011 Sonata, a four-door sedan that looks more like a two-door coupe and has an instantly recognizable crease swooping along its side. Phillip Zak, Hyundai's chief U.S. designer at the time, who has since gone to GM, says unique designs benefit car companies since customers are more emotionally attached to distinctive cars and will spend more on options like leather seats.

But risky designs can backfire, too. GM killed the Chevrolet SSR, a retro-styled convertible pickup, after only three years because of poor sales. Sales of the Nissan Juke, an odd little crossover with a bulbous nose, have been anemic so far this year.

So are we condemned to a future of cookie-cutter cars? Probably not. There are changes afoot that point to more differentiated design in the future.

Design studio advances, such as computerized modeling, have cut the cost and time it takes to develop new cars. At the same time, the market is fragmenting into more categories — small, midsize and large SUVs, for example — which gives automakers room to experiment because they're not depending on one model for blockbuster sales.

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But the biggest change, experts say, is that the quality of cars has gotten so good that design is one of the only ways a car company can distinguish itself.

"Car companies are being challenged to do interesting designs, and more of them," Molnar said.

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