

NAIAS Displays Show Automotive Industry Making Comeback after some Lean Years

DETROIT (AP) – Maybe it was the brand new, bright red Chevrolet Corvette gleaming in one corner, or the elegant BMW coupe in the other. Maybe it was just the free-flowing espresso at nearly every stand. But car companies were positively giddy recently as the North American International Auto Show had its thing in Detroit.

They have reason to be. U.S. new car and truck sales reached a five-year high of 14.5 million in 2012, and many executives and analysts think they'll climb to 15.5 million this year. Credit is easier to obtain, interest rates are low and many people who held on to old cars during the recession are ready to buy.

To catch those customers' eyes at the Detroit show, car companies unveiled 59 new cars and concepts. That's up from just 41 in 2012, a sign that automakers have more profits at their disposal and expect higher sales. Ford lured visitors with the oldest surviving Ford in the world, a 1903 Model A, and the newest, a chiseled pickup truck concept called Atlas that could become the next F-150. General Motors just sat back and watched the crowds gather around the Corvette.

One lesson from this year's show: There are plenty of ways to squeeze more efficiency from cars and trucks.

The Jeep Grand Cherokee is also making a jump to diesel power with a new, optional 3-liter V6 diesel that gets 30 miles per gallon on the highway, five better than the gas-powered V6.

Automakers are trying other tricks to save fuel as they face higher fuel economy requirements, even in muscle cars. The eight-cylinder engine on the 2014 Corvette kicks down to four at highway speeds. The grille and wheels of Ford's Atlas concept pickup have shutters that automatically close at high speeds to cut wind drag. Many carmakers are replacing steel with aluminum, carbon fiber and other materials to save weight.

Jeremy Anwyl, vice chairman of the Edmunds.com auto website, said many people have been surprised by the resurgence of internal combustion engines as new technology makes them more efficient.

"It is one reason why we're not all driving hybrids now, or EVs," Anwyl said.

Even so, there are plenty of gas-electric hybrids and some

new electric cars for customers to look at. Nissan, a late convert to the hybrid market, showed the Resonance concept, a dramatically styled hybrid crossover. Acura has the NSX hybrid supercar. And Cadillac debuted the ELR, its version of the Chevrolet Volt plug-in, which will go around 35 miles in all-electric mode before a small gas engine kicks in. And Tesla showed its all-electric Model X crossover, whose futuristic wing-like doors are among the handful of stop-and-stare features this year.

"The premium market took a couple of years off during the recession. I think we're going to see a comeback over the next couple of years."

– Jeff Schuster

With new home construction back on the rise, pickup truck sales are poised to grow in the coming year. And Detroit is ready.

GM showed its new trucks for the first time at the Detroit show. The Chevy Silverado and GMC Sierra, which will go on sale this spring, have mean-looking grilles, restyled interiors and new engines and transmissions that GM promises are going to be very efficient.

The trucks even have steps inset into the rear bumper so people can jump into the bed to get tools or tie down cargo.

Chrysler's just-refurbished Ram pickup – named the truck of the year by automotive journalists at the show – is also no slouch, boasting a segment-best 25 mpg on the highway.

But Ford, whose F-Series has been the top-selling truck for more than three decades, won't cede that title of champ without a fight.

The company pulled off one of the show's few surprises, lowering its Atlas pickup concept from the ceiling amid a shower of sparks during media previews.

Ford gave few details about the beefy, chiseled Atlas, other than to say that it hints at the look of the next F-Series, due to come out in 2014 or 2015.

"It sends a message that we hope to continue to strengthen our leadership in commercial vans and trucks," Ford's Chief Operating Officer Mark Fields said.

"We know there's a lot of people who want to take that away from us."

The competition could mean good deals for buyers in a segment already known for big discounts. Chrysler sales chief Reid Bigland said Ram will stay competitive, but Chrysler also wants to make money.

"We're not going to do anything crazy in the marketplace," he said.

Supple leather seats, finely stitched dashboards and sparkling chrome grilles are everywhere at this year's auto show, a sign that car companies are clawing at each other for a piece of the growing and lucrative U.S. luxury market.

Luxury sales grew almost 12 percent last year to over 1 million sales, and automakers are expecting further increases as people feel better about the economy and the Great Recession recedes into the rear-view mirror.

For the past few years, much of the U.S. auto sales growth has been in compact and midsize cars at the lower end of the price range, says Jeff Schuster, senior vice president of forecasting for LMC Automotive, a Detroit-area industry forecasting firm.

But recent trends show that consumers who want luxury items such as leather seats and touch screens are coming back into dealer showrooms and are showing their willingness to pay a little more to get what they want.

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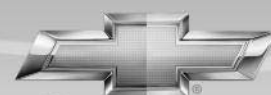
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