

Automakers pushing smaller, cheaper, greener at L.A. Auto Show

By Kevin Modesti, Staff Writer
Updated: 12/02/2009 07:48:50 PM PST



A fleet of Ford Fiestas wait to be unveiled at the Los Angeles Auto Show Wednesday at the Los Angeles Convention Center. (David Crane/Staff Photographer)

The Los Angeles Auto Show opens Friday with an unspoken theme: Less is More. Although gawkers at the 10-day event at the Los Angeles Convention Center will see no real shortage of flashy, muscular, even unattainable cars, they'll find automakers pushing smaller, cheaper, greener - and fewer - cars and vans.

Wednesday, the vehicle unveilings on the first of the L.A. Auto Show's two media preview days were as splashy as ever, but almost every major manufacturer highlighted the smallest of its new or updated models. The auto industry aims to sell affordability and environmentalism as it tries to bounce back from more than a year of economic crisis and faces an Obama Administration demand to lower harmful emissions dramatically.

This is the first major U.S. auto show since General Motors and Chrysler plunged into bankruptcy amid the credit squeeze and general economic downturn.

"We're going to do our best to keep the focus on the product," GM Vice Chairman Bob Lutz said. That won't be easy. Lutz was pinch-hitting as the L.A. Auto Show's keynote speaker for Fritz Henderson, the GM CEO who resigned on Tuesday. Lutz referred to the company's latest tremor only to say employees were surprised and saddened - and that he wouldn't answer reporters' questions about Henderson's sudden departure.

What Lutz wanted to talk about was the Chevrolet Volt, the plug-in hybrid electric car that is evidence of what the executive said is GM's commitment to green vehicles as a business strategy and "an obligation to society." GM announced that the Volt will be available for sale first in California and other as-yet unspecified markets in November 2010 for model year 2011.

"Californians are known to be leaders in accepting new technology," said Brent Dewar, vice president of Chevrolet Global. The Volt, which can go about 40 miles on one electric charge and about 200 miles more while a tank of gasoline recharges the battery, will carry a price of about \$40,000 - minus a federal incentive tax credit. It could be the most attention-grabbing of more than 30 vehicles making public debuts at the L.A. Auto Show. More than 900 vehicles will be on display, promoters say. The Los Angeles Auto Show - which has been held since 1907, except for a decade-long break around World War II - is marked this year in part by what isn't here. Nissan and its luxury-car division Infiniti are not represented because of the costs involved, and neither are upscale Bentley, Ferrari, Lamborghini and Maserati. Though Ford and Chevrolet have expanded their displays, the show overall takes up 10 percent less floor space than before. GM is here with a shorter product line. It is focusing on its U.S. core brands - Chevrolet,

Buick, GMC and Cadillac - and is down to 34 nameplates for 2010 from 48 in 2009.

Buzzwords Wednesday were "economical," "game-changer," and the old standby "forwardlooking technology" (if you want backwardlooking technology, get a horse). Chevy also unveiled the Cruze, a small car that replaces its Cobalt; Ford highlighted the new U.S. version of the economy Fiesta, scheduled to hit showrooms next summer and get 40 miles to the gallon on the highway; and Mazda put the spotlight on the new small Mazda 2, which the company calls "Zoom-Zoom Concentrated."

"I just think people are looking for value more than ever before," said Jim O'Sullivan, Mazda's North America CEO. "Conspicuous consumption isn't a priority right now."

Honda drew smirks from onlookers when it unveiled the P-Nut (Personal-Neo Urban Transport), a microcar designed exclusively for city drivers.

And in a sign that practicality is important as the auto industry tries to lure back cashstrapped buyers, Toyota showed off a redesigned Sienna minivan, aiming at young families with a lower price than the current model.

Even high-end automakers showed signs of adjusting, in their own ways.

Porsche is unveiling a new edition of the convertible Boxter Spyder that will be the manufacturer's lightest-ever car and will reduce the model's emissions by 18 percent, according to Porsche international spokesman Michael Baumann, speaking beside a wine bar that's part of the company's display. Price: an economical \$61,200.

Rolls-Royce is giving L.A. audiences the first look at a smaller luxury car called the Ghost and pointing to its fuel economy as the best in its market segment. Price: an easy-on-the-wallet \$245,000.

"Our customers have felt the (economic) downturn as well," said Rolls-Royce marketing chief Andy Thomas.