

car WATCH

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2012 Car Buyers Gain by Strong Auto Industry Rebound



FREEWHEELING By Kate McLeod

Last year was a good year for the auto business.

THE 2013 FORD FUSION

– Sleek design will differentiate Fusion from other sedans in the midsize segment, with class leading fuel economy in gasoline (37 mpg on the highway with the 1.6-liter EcoBoost engine), hybrid (at least 47 mpg in the city) and an all-new plug-in hybrid. (Courtesy photo)

Sales are

projected by Edmunds.com to be around 12.8 million when they are announced later this month, the highest volume since 2009, when sales had dropped to 10.4 million, a 27-year low.

Paul Taylor, chief economist of the National Automobile Dealers Association, predicts nearly 14 million new cars and light trucks will be purchased or leased in 2012. Taylor, who is forecasting sales of

capture market share in 2012 by rebuilding a diverse selection of inventory at dealerships, ranging from cars and CUVs to truck-based SUVs.

As the auto industry strongly rebounds, what will be the emerging trends for consumers? Fuel efficiency will continue to dominate, but style takes on a bigger role, too.

What's going to sell in 2012? If automotive designers have anything to say about it – and it appears they do – style could be the deal breaker

which made its debut at the Detroit Auto Show, looks to be the first production vehicle to debut Ford's new design direction.

Cadillac recently debuted a concept luxury model called the "Ciel" (which means sky). Cadillac's history of beautiful names is back. It is significant that Cadillac is calling its concept a name with the-sky-is-the-limit imagery, and not a robotic code like "XCEWSVQ97."

The automaker signals Cadillac has its confidence back and is

tion version is unknown.

BMW has come up with an exciting technological combination. Announced in 2011, ActiveHybrid becomes available in the 2012 BMW 5 Series around March. ActiveHybrid combines a twin turbocharged engine with an electric drive system and an eight-speed gearbox. ActiveHybrid uses power electronics to manage energy output precisely, adding even more efficiency to the vehicle. The BMW ActiveHybrid 5 is the most power-

What's going to sell in 2012? If automotive designers have anything to say about it – and it appears they do – style could be the deal breaker for 2012 car shoppers.

13.945 million new cars and light trucks for 2012 in the U.S., cites three key factors for the increase: aging vehicles, affordable credit, and aggressive incentives.

A key factor is pent-up demand caused by more consumers shopping out of necessity to replace older vehicles. According to the NADA, automakers will also wage an aggressive battle to

for 2012 car shoppers. Case in point are a couple of recent unveilings of visually exciting new models to hit the showrooms in 2012, as well as concept cars cruising this year's auto show circuits.

Ford is debuting its new design language expressed in its new Evos concept car. Expect to be shaking your head and say, "That's a Ford?" The 2013 Ford Fusion,

no longer trying to imitate the Europeans. When you look at the Ciel's sweeping lines and its luxury front end you couldn't call it anything but a Cadillac. Cadillac is equipping cars with state-of-the-art technologies and luscious interiors. The concept Ciel's doors are hinged at the rear for easy, graceful access for both front and rear occupants. Whether this shows up in a produc-

ful and efficient full hybrid in its segment.

Ethanol tax credits have ended, as did tariffs on imported ethanol. That means we are not giving refiners our tax dollars anymore and the industry is no longer protected from competition. However, the government now allows refiners to add more ethanol to fuel – 15 percent up from 10.

The Fiat 500 has huggable styling and meets expectations in the fun-to-drive column. Unfortunately, the 500 is probably too small to make it big in the U.S. The Mini, with its great styling and powertrain, is bigger and geared much more to our preferences. Fiat's plans to bring a sedan here in 2011 fell through leaving Fiat's dealers with only one car to sell. Fiat sold only about 15,000 cars in the U.S. not the 50,000 they predicted. The Fiat dealers – 130 of them – are sitting there with a big investment and no cars to sell other than a car that isn't selling.

Forecasters say that North American light vehicle production will increase about 5 percent in the first quarter of 2012 and that production will increase more over the year. In most of the automotive sector, it seems that things are looking up.

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BONUS WHEELS

Most Impressive 2012 Toyota Camry Model – the Hybrid

BY DAVE VAN SICKLE

For 2012, the most impressive car in the Camry lineup is the Hybrid. It debuts a highly revised version of the Toyota's Hybrid Synergy Drive powertrain that delivers an EPA-estimated 43 miles per gallon city and 39 mpg highway, 41 mpg combined.

A new 2.5-liter engine, like the 2.4-liter it replaces, uses the Atkinson cycle engine strategy to achieve maximum efficiency. Variable valve timing, an electric water pump, a roller-rocker type valve train and a variable-output oil pump help to boost fuel economy.

As in previous Toyota hybrid models, the unique transaxle combines output from the four-cylinder engine with a small high-torque electric motor. The system produces a combined 200 horsepower and varies power between the gas engine and electric motor, or combines both, as needed.

Several seemingly minor improvements in motor voltage control and regenerative braking have vastly improved the driving experience. The transition from regenerative braking to conventional friction braking is so refined that you have to consciously feel for it to know it's happening. Moving the voltage converter to the engine compartment, along with a more compact battery design has increased trunk volume by 2.1 cubic feet.

Lighter overall vehicle weight also contributes to better performance and fuel economy. Its 7.6-second 0-to-60 mph acceleration time places the 2012 performance Camry Hybrid between the four-cylinder and V-6 models. Lower rolling resistance tires – available for the first time in 17-inch size – help boost fuel economy, but have a negative effect on ride quality.

All of the new 2012 Camrys feature Toyota's latest electric power steering system, which eliminates the parasitic drag of conventional hydraulic systems. Energy is consumed only when assist power is necessary, helping to improve fuel economy. As with other brands offering electric power steering, Camry has a problem with on-center feel and requires constant tiny steering



HYBRID – The all-new 2012 Camry Hybrid debuts a highly revised version of Toyota's Hybrid Synergy Drive powertrain, including a new 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine. The 2012 Camry Hybrid LE, with EPA-estimated 43 mpg city/39 mpg highway/41 mpg combined, yields a more-than-30 percent boost in fuel economy in the EPA city and combined driving cycles, compared to the previous generation, thanks largely to the new hybrid powertrain, but also due to lighter vehicle weight and optimized aerodynamics. (Courtesy photo)

2012 Toyota Camry Hybrid LE Specifications

VEHICLE TYPE: 5-passenger FWD midsize sedan

BASE PRICE: \$25,900 (as tested: \$26,660)

MOTOR TYPE: 4-cylinder and Toyota Hybrid System

DISPLACEMENT: 2.5-liter

HORSEPOWER (net): 156 at 5700 rpm (net 200 hp)

TORQUE (lb.-ft.): 156 at 4500 rpm (THS 199 lb.-ft)

TRANSMISSION: CVT

WHEELBASE: 109.3 in.

OVERALL LENGTH: 189.2 in.

TURNING CIRCLE (curb-to-curb): 36.7 ft.

FUEL CAPACITY: 17 gal.

EPA MILEAGE RATING: 43 mpg city, 39 mpg highway

wheel movements to stay in a straight line.

A Hybrid-exclusive instrument cluster with both a Toyota Hybrid System indicator and fuel consumption indicator helped us operate the car as economically as possible. Instantaneous fuel economy is shown with LEDs around the outside of the average fuel economy gauge. The car's Multi-Information display graphically shows fuel economy in real time and can also show energy flow, as well as cruising range information.

Exclusive exterior and interior design touches differentiate the 2012 Hybrid from other Camry models. Inside, Hybrid-exclusive trim is found on the instrument panel and door switch bases, upper console panels and shift knob. The Hybrid also features its own exclusive seat fabric in ivory or light gray. Leather and Ultrasuede are also available.

The standard audio system has six speakers and a 6.1-inch screen that also displays the energy monitor and fuel consumption data, and the image from a back-up camera. The screen offers a new low-cost navigation system and serves as a portal for Entune, Toyota's new multimedia system.

Entune supports mobile apps, such as Bing, OpenTable, and movietickets.com, along with accessing useful travel-related services, such as live weather, traffic, fuel information, stocks, and sports. The system can read-back and replay text messages, with the ability to respond by pre-set "Quick Reply Messages" such as: "I'm driving and will reply later."

The 2012 Camry Hybrid LE and XLE start at \$25,900 and \$27,400, respectively. All Camry models are equipped with 10 standard airbags with the front-passenger's knee airbag and rear-seat side airbags being new to the Camry.

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NEW ON WHEELS

2012 Ford Focus SFE – 40 MPG, Nimble Handling, No Sacrifices

BY BILL VISNIC

The point of the 2012 Ford Focus SFE – a special high-efficiency optimization package – isn't so much about its 40 miles per gallon highway rating as it is the fact you have to give up none of the Focus' intrinsic goodness to get to that 40-mpg economy. Car-company marketers are convinced today's efficiency-minded buyers want to see a "40-mpg" rating. Some are even fearful their small cars might not sell without it.

Ford probably thought the

ventional automatic with its creamy torque converter to impart the automatic transmission "feel" we're all accustomed to, the PowerShift actually is a manual transmission with a sophisticated module to "automatically" manipulate its twin clutches. It's not a new fad – Volkswagen, Audi and BMW have offered these dual-clutch automated manuals for some time – but Ford's calibration of this "automatic" transmission has left many cool to its sometimes erratic and abrupt mannerisms. We don't find the Focus SFE's Powershift transmission a deal-breaker,



THE 2012 FORD FOCUS raises the small-car segment bar for style, technology, driving dynamics and fuel economy. The SFE Package offers a six-speed PowerShift automatic transmission with SelectShift functionality, via a shifter-mounted (+/-) toggle switch. (Manufacturer photo)

thing. The Focus SFE comes with the same outstanding ride quality and nimble dynamics that we've enjoyed on every version of the new 2012 Focus. To get the big efficiency numbers, you used to have to drive a "stripper," but the Focus SFE isn't anything like that. The interior is first-class, with materials that Ford manages to make look better than they probably cost. In any trim – even the "fuel economy special" – the new-generation 2012 Focus is a seriously classy compact car.

SPARE PARTS

2012 FIAT 500: The modern-generation Fiat 500 offers safety, fuel economy, quality and advanced technology balanced with iconic Italian style. The Fiat 500 is a city-friendly four-passenger subcompact small car size, with engaging driving dynamics, an all-new fuel-efficient 1.4-liter MultiAir engine that delivers up to 38 highway mpg and a best-in-class 30 mpg city (with manual transmission). The 2012 Fiat 500

has been named a "Top Safety Pick" by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. The Fiat 500 has seven standard airbags for enhanced passenger protection. High strength steel door beams offer additional protection in the event of a side impact. (Source: Chrysler Group, LLC)

YEAR-END DEALS: The automotive research site, CarGu-

see **NEW ON WHEELS** on page 4

2012 Ford Focus SFE Specifications

- VEHICLE TYPE:** 5-passenger FWD compact sedan
- BASE PRICE:** \$17,400 (as tested: \$20,580)
- MOTOR TYPE:** 16-valve DOHC 4-cylinder w/DGI
- DISPLACEMENT:** 2.0-liter
- HORSEPOWER (net):** 160 at 6500 rpm
- TORQUE (lb.-ft.):** 146 at 4450 rpm
- TRANSMISSION:** 6-speed dual-clutch automated manual
- WHEELBASE:** 104.3 in.
- OVERALL LENGTH:** 178.5 in.
- TURNING CIRCLE (curb-to-curb):** 36 ft.
- FUEL CAPACITY:** 12.4 gal.
- EPA MILEAGE RATING:** 28 mpg city, 40 mpg highway

SFE setup would appeal mainly to penny-pinchers, so it's unavailable for the Focus 5-door hatchback, which many believe to be the better-looking of the two 2012 Focus body styles. This is only a minor annoyance, as the Focus 4-door sedan's sheet metal is not unsexy. Leaving the Hyundai Elantra out of the equation, the 4-door and 5-door Focus makes for what probably are the most premium-looking compact cars on the road.

The triumph of the 160-horsepower Focus SFE is that you get the coveted 40-mpg rating and don't have to sacrifice any of the new 2012 Focus' already renowned refinement. That includes not having to manually shift for yourself: the only way to get the \$495 SFE package is to get a Focus in the \$17,400 midgrade SE trim with an automatic transmission. Many "high economy" packages of the past typically have required a manual transmission on the path to fuel frugality.

The automatic PowerShift has six forward gears, and that's good. But the design is a new and slightly acquired taste. As opposed to a con-

but we'll say others do a better job programming these high-tech automats.

The PowerShift intrinsically is a manual transmission, and that's one of the things that help the Focus SFE hit its magic highway fuel-economy number. Other modifications include active "shutters" on the front grille that selectively vary airflow to the radiator when it doesn't need much cooling air, low-rolling resistance 16-inch tires, aerodynamic wheel covers and a rear spoiler.

Whether you achieve 40 mpg on the highway with the Focus SFE will be dependent on many factors. Seeing 35 mpg on the onboard fuel-economy readout was no problem. Teasing those screen readouts into the 40s takes more talent, fortitude, a good tailwind, plus an excruciatingly patient right foot. Like most of the cars you'll see advertising 40-mpg highway numbers, it's probably best to figure on 35 mpg, which still gets you a long way, even on the Focus SFE's small 12.4-gallon fuel tank.

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TRUCK TALK

'Leap of Faith' in 1994 is Inspiration for Today's Ram



THE 2012 RAM has a starting price of \$21,475. The 2012 Ram's classic look, featuring a big-rig-style front-end, was spawned by a revolutionary pickup design from about two decades ago. (Courtesy photo)

BY TIM SPELL

The "macho" form of today's Ram pickup was inspired by the revolutionary design of the 1994 Dodge Ram, which vaulted the truck to a much higher popularity and sales plateau.

The old Ram look, featuring a big-rig-style front-end is a "keeper, but in modified form," said Ralph Gilles, president and CEO, Dodge Brand, Chrysler Group LLC.

"It was loud and clear that the iconic essence – the basic tall grille, down lamps – we own, and we have the duty to celebrate that as much as we can," Gilles said. "But we did revolutionize the current truck in its demeanor. We tried to make it as sporty as we could, but yet still tough."

The new Ram's oldest ancestor is a concept truck, revealed selectively to me by former Chrysler Corp. chairman Lee Iacocca during a March 1990 interview.

"It's a knockout," Iacocca said. "It's a different pickup than you've ever seen in your life, yet macho."

More than 20 years ago, the public had come close to getting a strong hint at what the automaker's truck of the future would look like, but a last-minute decision by Iacocca nixed its appearance at the 1990 North American International Auto Show in Detroit.

The concept model, named "Little Red Truck" was a midsize pickup like Dodge's Dakota with a body sculpted similar to the future new-generation full-sizer – radically different from the chunky prehistoric Ram that had been around in basic form for almost two decades. The LRT concept made only a brief appearance on the auto show floor, but was rolled back into hiding before crowds had a chance to gather.

"I yanked it," Iacocca said, explaining it had been pulled back from the show due to the potential to attract unwanted visitors from competitors like Ford, General Motors, as well as Japanese manufacturers.

Surprisingly, a few months later I received a call from Chrysler informing the company would provide limited information about the project, code named T-300, and even send a photo of the LRT concept – permitting a controlled leak to media.

"It's not going to be a me-too truck, but very much a trendsetter," said Stan Clark, national marketing plans manager for Dodge trucks.

A focus group of "pickup intenders" was gathered in Fort Worth, Texas. "When they were told that it was a Dodge product," Clark said, "the people were really ecstatic about what they saw – that a domestic manufacturer could come up with a truck that would look like this."

The LRT photo Chrysler shared was bold and different. It had dropped

fenders and wore a prominent cross-bar grille. It was in January 1993, at the Detroit Auto Show, when the 1994 production truck, spawned by the LRT design concept, officially was unveiled.

"We didn't want to come out with just a new truck," said Chrysler President Bob Lutz, "we wanted to achieve a breakthrough in pickup-truck design."

Lutz called the bold decision to build the Ram a "leap of faith." He explained its styling was influenced by trucks of yesteryear, which had "style, presence and personality."

The most dramatic example of truck personality was the military-bred Dodge Power Wagon, Lutz said, which rolled into the market after World War II. Designers were inspired by the Power Wagon's macho presence with a prominent grille and dropped front fenders. Along with researching the oldies, designers put together a theme board of new big rigs – Kenworths, Peterbilts and Internationals.

Chrysler's leap of faith in design paid off. As Iacocca had suspected early on, other manufacturers would be interested in what it had accomplished. The 1994 Dodge Ram styling generated macho fever, and affected how other automakers today design pickups.

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NEW ON WHEELS

from page 3

rus.com reports used-car shoppers will get a substantially better deal if they shop close to the Christmas holiday rather than later in the winter. CarGurus' Used Car Price Index data shows used car prices typically hit their lowest average of the year in the period between Thanksgiving and the first week of January, before rapidly correcting by February. Analysts expect prices on used cars will bottom out by January 8, 2012. "In these

challenging economic times, adding "car" to the holiday shopping list might seem crazy, but now is actually the optimal time of year to find a great deal on a used model," said Langley Steinert, founder and CEO of CarGurus. (Source: CarGurus.com)

CAR REPAIR ADVICE: Sometimes when making a left turn when driving my 2003 Chevy Impala the traction light comes on for a few seconds and there is a loud hum that causes static in the radio. Do you have

any suggestions? Answer: Making a left turn and getting static in the radio indicates that the right front wheel bearing should be checked. When making a left turn an additional load is put on the right side. The radio static is usually caused by static buildup in the front bearing from a bad bearing. Have a good technician road-test the car with a scan tool before spending any money for repairs.

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