

January 18, 2009
DETROIT AUTO SHOW

Revved Down but Charged Up

By LAWRENCE ULRICH

DETROIT

FOR decades, the marketing phrase “Sell the sizzle, not the steak” aptly described the scene at auto shows. Reporters flocked to gawk at glamorous space-age concepts or thundering sports cars, leaving more humdrum, and practical, machines to the tire-kicking public.

But new realities were on center stage at last week’s press previews of the [North American International Auto Show](#). As car companies spoke grandly of the “electrification” of the automobile, it often sounded like the same-old sizzle, best taken with grains of salt. Yet the atmosphere in Cobo Center felt changed. While some of the



show’s plug-in cars and pure electric vehicles will surely turn out to be hokum, the variety and scale of the offerings suggest that change is afoot — new, leaner meat will be added to the automotive menu.

Whether enough consumers are ready to have their habits and appetites changed is still a question. So, too, is whether the Detroit-based automakers can survive to be part of the revolution.

General Motors, Ford, [Chrysler](#), Honda and Toyota showed various hybrids, plug-in hybrids or pure E.V.’s and pledged to bring the technologies to market in 2010-12. Underdog start-ups did the same, including Fisker Automotive, a California company whose \$88,000 Fisker Karma sport sedan, a plug-in hybrid, is scheduled for production this year.

But the return of cheap gasoline has already dampened hybrid sales. Throughout the show, auto executives emphasized that stable fuel prices, or a coherent government energy policy, would help them anticipate what consumers would buy next. Because of wild swings in fuel prices, “Every six months we get called stupid for having the wrong products,” said [Robert A. Lutz](#), G.M.’s vice chairman.

"Far be it for me to be the first auto executive to call for a gas tax," Mr. Lutz said. "But right now, it's like fighting obesity by requiring clothing manufacturers to make nothing but small sizes."

Electric cars did generate the show's central irony: the models that will most impress Detroit's new overseers in Washington will also drag down the automakers' bottom lines for several years. Companies are deep in the costly research-and-development phase — G.M. says it plans to invest more than \$1 billion to develop the Chevrolet Volt's technology, and that car, Detroit's first plug-in, is nearly two years from market and unlikely to be made in large numbers.

Still, if the Detroit Three can muddle through the economic crisis, developing new alternative-fuel technologies might end up being a smart investment in their long-term fortunes.

With its chief executive, [Alan Mulally](#), serving as host, Ford showed here-and-now machines including the Fusion Hybrid sedan whose city economy rating of 41 miles a gallon beats the [Toyota Camry Hybrid](#) by an impressive 8 m.p.g. (If Ford returns to hearings in Washington, Mr. Mulally might consider driving the Fusion Hybrid onto the Senate floor.)

The 2010 Taurus might be Ford's best shot to restore the name of a family car that used to outsell the Camry. On sale this summer, the Taurus seems a big step up, with a sophisticated styling and an optional twin-turbocharged EcoBoost V-6.

Toyota unveiled the third generation of its hybrid heavyweight, the Prius. Toyota expects the more frugal Prius to achieve a 50 m.p.g. rating, preserving its title of the highest-mileage car in America. And if Honda can't beat the Prius's mileage, it will beat its price: the 2010 Insight hatchback goes on sale this spring as America's lowest-cost hybrid, offering 41 m.p.g. for around \$18,000.

With no-shows like Nissan, Infiniti, Ferrari, Porsche, Mitsubishi and others opening up main-floor vacancies, Chinese automakers were let out of the Cobo Center basement. BYD (Build Your Dreams, backed by [Warren Buffett](#)) and Brilliance showed their latest potential threats to the automotive order. These included plug-in and electric models from BYD, vehicles that executives said would be sold in the United States in two years.

These were among the future showroom models introduced in Detroit:

MERCEDES-BENZ E-CLASS The latest edition of Mercedes' well-regarded sedan goes on sale in July with V-6 and V-8 engines and technology features that include Attention Assist. The Benz monitors 70 parameters and flashes a coffee-cup icon and "Take a Break" warning when it senses that the driver is getting drowsy.

LEXUS HS 250H Lexus' first hybrid-only model (no gasoline-only version will be offered) goes on sale in late summer. The conservatively styled sedan has a sleek cabin, the latest safety and convenience gadgets and a roughly 33-m.p.g. hybrid system adapted from the Camry.

[BMW Z4](#) Ditching its fabric roof for a two-piece powered hardtop, BMW's taut two-seat convertible grows bigger and heavier but the controversial design has evolved handsomely.

[CADILLAC SRX](#) The current SRX has impressive driving dynamics, but many potential customers didn't embrace its styling. The new model, based on Chevy Equinox architecture, aims at putting Cadillac on stronger footing in luxury crossovers.

LINCOLN MKT MKT must not stand for "marketing," or Lincoln would abandon its confusing nomenclature that includes MKS (big sedan), MKZ (midsize sedan) and MKX (crossover). On sale later this year, the MKT is a luxury take on the well-received Ford Flex.

[FORD MUSTANG SHELBY GT500](#) Fuel prices may be down, but the economy has sunk with it. Financial jitters could dampen the desire of blue-collar boomers for a \$45,000, 540-horsepower Mustang.

[BUICK LACROSSE](#) A joint Chinese-American design aimed in part at the Buick-loving Chinese, this low-key midsize sedan goes on sale this summer with a choice of V-6 engines and optional all-wheel drive.

[MINI COOPER CONVERTIBLE](#) On sale in March, the 2009 Mini convertible will start at \$24,550. The convertible adopts the platform and technology of the second-generation Mini hardtop, with added features including pop-up rollover bars.

[AUDI R8 5.2 FSI QUATTRO](#) This upgraded version of Audi's sensational midengine sports car produces 518 horsepower from a detuned version of the [Lamborghini Gallardo's](#) V-10. Able to reach 60 m.p.h. in under 4 seconds, it comes to America in 2010.

Automakers also highlighted several concept cars, from barely disguised versions of future showroom models to fanciful projects that may never see the light of day:

CHRYSLER 200C Chrysler's electric-car technology still seemed less market-ready than its competitors. But whether the 200C sedan gets an alternative powertrain or not, the design has the look of a potential mass-market home run — one that Chrysler desperately needs. And it offered a hopeful glimpse at what Chrysler's future might look like under the eye of Ralph Gilles, the company's new design chief.

AUDI SPORTBACK CONCEPT Audi continued its streak of auto-show stunners with this stretched, creamy éclair of a four-door, which will be called the A7 when it goes on sale in 2010. A modified hatchback, the Sportback disguises its practicality with a hatch opening integrated into the roofline.

[VOLVO S60](#) The current S60 is getting old, but this glimpse at its replacement is sleek and Scandinavian-modern. An efficient turbocharged 1.6-liter 4-cylinder produces 180 horsepower.

LINCOLN CONCEPT C In a show light on whimsy, the Concept C recalled happier times. A bustleback ode to the Renault Mégane, the cute hatchback offers hints of a future small Lincoln based on the [Ford Focus](#).

CADILLAC CONVERJ Its name may be the show's silliest, but the Converj appears serious. The four-seat luxury car adopts a modified version of the Chevy Volt plug-in system, now called Voltec.

SUBARU LEGACY The current Legacy is a slick-driving all-wheel-drive sedan that's often overlooked. With that in mind, Subaru unveiled a larger restyled Legacy with an Audi-esque front end, styling expected on a 2010 showroom model.

VOLKSWAGEN CONCEPT BLUESPORT VW's handsome midengine convertible was its vision of a more socially responsible sports car. The turbocharged 2-liter diesel engine is said to be capable of 50 m.p.g. on the highway.

DODGE CIRCUIT EV With Chrysler pinching every penny, the chances of the Circuit reaching dealerships seem low. But the all-electric Circuit, based on the Lotus Europa, was the raciest of four electric prototypes by Chrysler.

TOYOTA FT-EV This stubby two-seat muffin is the first taste of a battery-powered commuter car with a 50-mile range that Toyota hopes to offer in 2012. Toyota said it would lease small numbers of a plug-in Prius late this year to commercial customers.

•

The North American International Auto Show runs through Jan. 25. Information at naias.com.



2010 Buick LaCrosse