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# AUTO SHOWCASE

## Mazda has hit with new wagon

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TOKYO - Mazda Motor Corp. said Tuesday its new Demio compact wagon, the struggling automaker's first model introduced under new president Henry Wallace, have been selling much faster than expected.

Mazda said it received 7,000 orders during the first week of sales in Japan for the Demio, a smaller, cheaper car targeted at younger drivers. The company had a sales target of 5,000 for the first month of sales.

The Demio, which is not being sold in the United States, is the only new model launched this year by Mazda. Its price starts at \$8,700.

Wallace, a Scotsman who took over as president in June, is the first foreigner to head a Japanese automaker. He is a former executive of Ford Motor Co., which owns 33.4 percent of Mazda.

In its latest fiscal year, Mazda earned \$3.3 million to turn its first annual profit in two years. The automaker has been dogged by bulging inventories, lagging sales and huge investment costs.

## Honda dealers may file suit

BALTIMORE - A federal judge has ruled that Honda dealers who claim they lost millions because of a company-wide bribery scheme can sue the Japanese automaker for racketeering and antitrust violations.

The ruling by U.S. District Judge J. Frederick Motz clears the way for the Honda dealers to pursue lawsuits against the American Honda Motor Company Co. and its Japanese parent, Honda Ltd.

In a separate decision related to the case, the judge ruled that three high-ranking Honda executives in Japan must come to Baltimore and give the dealers' lawyers sworn depositions.

Some 50 Honda dealers across the country have filed lawsuits against the carmaker. The lawsuits were consolidated and are being heard in U.S. District Court in Baltimore.

The lawsuits claim that Honda's officials ignored a \$15 million scheme in which its executives solicited bribes and kickbacks from some dealers in the 1970s and 1980s in return for supplying them with cars, especially popular Honda Accords and Civics.

Honda lawyers have filed a series of motions to dismiss the case. They said that Honda executives were not aware of the scheme, that the scheme did not amount to racketeering on the part of the company and that no antitrust issues were at stake.

"This case is far from concluded," said Jeffrey Smith, a Honda attorney.

In his decision, Motz ruled that the plaintiffs' racketeering case could proceed, and decided that one claim of antitrust violations should be dropped from the case. But he ruled that the dealers could proceed under another complicated antitrust theory.

More importantly, Motz said Honda Ltd. and its Japanese executives should be part of the case.

"Plaintiffs have stated claims against Honda Japan," Motz wrote in his 73-page ruling. "It was Honda Japan who choose to structure management as it did, having its executives cross corporate lines with regular frequency."

## TEST DRIVE



1996 Dodge NEON

## Neon has faults, but it's fun



Winfred  
B.  
Cross

Nearly three years ago Plymouth used a Super Bowl ad campaign to introduce the world to Neon, its replacement for the aged Shadow and Sundance twins.

To say that campaign was successful may be the understatement of the year. The commercials were silly, but that was the intent. Neon was supposed to be a fun kind of thing, something different.

After spending a week with one I'd say both those objectives were met splendidly.

The Neon's look is the first

hint that there is fun to be had. The exterior has a hint of Volkswagen Beetle a la the high, round roof and big headlights. It's not as cute as the Beetle, but it's spunky. The big wheel well openings and the flared fenders make it sporty looking.

The exterior dimensions are tidy but the interior is far from being tiny. There is an abundance of head and leg room for tall drivers. That has to do with Chrysler's use of cab-forward principles. The wheels are pushed outward as far as possible. The cabin gets the most space while the hood and trunk are fairly short. This is Chrysler's best application of this technology. It's also used on the LH cars (Dodge Intrepid, Chrysler Concorde, Eagle Vision), but those cars are excessively large, not mid-size as the company would like you to think.

With all that space you can fit five adults in the Neon without feeling overcrowded. The wheel base is a generous 104 inches, which helps a lot. But notice I didn't say anything about being comfortable. That's because the seats in the Neon are suspect. They have precious little padding and sit very low. The front seats aren't really bad, but I wished for some lower back support. And no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't adjust the driver's seat so I could be comfortable while being able to see out of the windshield and the back light.

I only sat in the back seat for a few minutes. That was long enough to let me know I couldn't sit there even on a short trip. The bottom cushion is too short and too hard. The seat back is tilted at an odd angle. What made matters worse was

that it felt as if I was sitting on the floor.

By the way, my test car was a Dodge. There is no distinction between the Dodge or Plymouth versions except hood ornaments and where you buy them.

With that aside, driving the Neon was mostly a pleasant experience. I was surprised at how peppy the 2.0-liter, 16-valve engine was, producing 132 horsepower at 6,000 rpm, more than most engines in its class. Torque is 129 pounds-foot at 5000 rpm. This gives the car a quick feeling. You can sprint to 60 mph in about 8 seconds, which isn't bad at all for an economy car.

If you want even more go-juice, the Neon Sport coupe may be what you want. Its engine is tweaked to make 150 horsepower. It has a firmer suspension so its handling moves from good to sparkling.

But that engine revs fairly high, as does this one. I had to keep rowing through the gears. That's not a bad thing because the five-speed stick is fairly slick. It balks a bit in the first two gears, but afterwards it's nearly effortless.

There is a downside to all the power. It doesn't come on very smoothly. In fact, the engine is a downright boisterous bugger. It's not a nice, deep sound, but a high pitched tinny one. It's almost unlivable before you get to top gear. Once you get there it's OK. Chrysler says it has added extra insulation to quell the noise. If that's the case, I'm glad I haven't driven a Neon before now. I don't own ear plugs.

Still the car's handling makes up for the noisy shortcoming. It can easily be tossed into a corner with authority. Straight line stability is good as well. The tight suspension will beg for you to find twisty roads, but they need to be smooth twisty road. It doesn't seem to like bumps of any kind. Even small imperfections are transmitted to the occupants. It wasn't unbearable, but it was unpleasant at times.

Would those things be enough to keep me from buy-

ing a Neon? If the cars faults stopped there, no. But there is another big fault - faulty build quality. Never have I been in a car that felt as cheap as this. Every piece of material - from the sheet metal to the carpet - felt low-grade. I was able to put my hand under the edge of the headliner. I also pulled the front door panels back far enough to stick a finger in. The plastic used for the dash felt as if it belonged in a Yugo. And yes, there were a few squeaks and rattles.

That's probably why Chrysler can sell the Neon so cheaply. The base price for my test sedan was \$9,995, which included dual air bags, power steering, wheel covers, warning chimes for headlights on, key in ignition and unfastened seat belts, tinted glass, child-proof door locks and intermittent windshield wipers.

The options list wasn't very long, but it was necessary stuff: rear window defroster (\$205), dual manual remote mirrors (\$70), air conditioning (\$1,000), premium radio with cassette (\$585) and tilt steering column (\$150).

With destination charges, the as-tested price came to \$12,505. That's not a bad price for a car with the Neon's performance numbers. You cannot buy a Corolla, Civic, Protege or maybe even an Escort for that amount of money with those numbers. However, each one of those cars are built far better than the Neon.

The Neon's faults are not enough to keep a lot of people from buying. I've made a game of trying to count all the different Neons I've seen since my test. I'm either seeing the same people everyday or there are an awful lot of these critters roaming the prairie. That tells me either I'm too picky or people are forgiving when it comes to this car.

It's probably a little of both. It's easy to see why people would be so forgiving. The Neon is fun to drive. Heck, you can even make some Mustang and Camaro drives work hard to keep up. But with all the faults, I wonder how long the honeymoon will last?

## Home-based auto mechanic gets \$10,000 fine for no-show

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

RACINE, Wis. - A machinist who repairs cars as a hobby has been fined \$10,000 for operating an illegal business at his home.

Municipal Judge Robert Michelson entered a default judgement when Edward C. Smith failed to attend a court hearing this week.

Smith says he was unfairly targeted after a neighbor complained.

"They have assumed I'm doing something because of one person. What operation of a business? This is my garage with my cars. It's just a hobby for extra money," Smith said Friday. "I think this is crazy. I feel they're harassing me. They need to go after the real criminals."

The fine against Smith is one of the largest imposed within the city's building code, said Bob Jensen, the city's chief inspector.

The building department has complaints of Smith repairing cars in the alley dating back to 1986, Jensen said. He was cited for doing repairs in a residential area.

During the summer there are three or four complaints a week about illegal auto repair businesses and it is "becoming a problem in the city," Jensen said.

Smith said he has bought and restored old cars as a hobby for more than 20 years. On Friday, there were two cars in Smith's back yard - a 1984 Cavalier and a 1979 Nova. In his garage was a 1983-84 Eagle Concord, a 1970 Cadillac and a 1974 Impala.

"Everything here you see is mine," he said. "If an individual does come here to have their brakes fixed and I have no money in my pocket, I do it. But I am not running a business here."

Smith said the city has ticketed all the cars in the alley behind his home and put up a "No Parking" sign there.

If Smith fails to pay his fine by Oct. 28, he could face 493 days in jail. But Michelson could reopen the case if Smith petitions the court by Thursday.

Smith said he was told he could meet with the city attorney to discuss lowering the fine and arrange for another inspection of his property by the building department.

"I don't have any money to give these people," he said.



## Toyota unveils 1997 Camry Sunday

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GEORGETOWN, Ky. - Industry analysts and car reviewers say Toyota Motor Corp. engineers succeeded in their goal for the restyled 1997 Camry, unveiled Sunday - make it a better car but cheaper to produce to keep it competitively priced.

Toyota will begin shipping the new Camry to dealers Tuesday.

"The best car built in the United States gets better ... a lot better," Automobile magazine proclaims in its October issue.

What consumers see is a sharper, sportier-looking sedan that makes the Camry "distinctive from the mass of round-shaped cars on the road," Don Esmond, vice president of Toyota Motor Sales.

Customers also will pay less for the new model, say central Kentucky Toyota dealers. The manufacturer's suggested retail price for a four-cylinder 1997 Camry LE is \$19,688, \$300 less than a '96 LE. The price difference is actually greater when you consider that the '97 model comes standard with anti-lock brakes, which is an \$1,100 option on the '96 LE.

The price cut will boost Camry's chances of overtaking the Ford Taurus and Honda Accord in the tight battle for the No. 1-selling car in America. Taurus has won the title four years running.

The only way to keep the Camry's price down was to cut production costs by taking content out of it. The industry buzzword for this is "decontenting."

The word has a negative connotation because customers think it means taking out features, such as air bags or anti-lock brakes. Automakers say it implies their products are cheap.

But that's not the case, said Ron Harbour of Harbour & Associates, a manufacturing consulting firm based in Troy, Mich. "Decontenting means coming up with lower-cost solutions, not taking things away from the car," he said.

Case in point: Clips used in a door panel. In the '96 Camry, Toyota used a clip that had a shiny chrome finish. The clips were redesigned



slightly for the '97 model and came without the chrome finish because customers can't see the clip. This saved Toyota 10 cents a clip. There are six clips in each door, a savings of \$2.40 a car.

That doesn't seem like much, but when you figure the Georgetown plant makes nearly 300,000 Camrys a year, it's a savings of \$720,000.

Affordability was a priority for Toyota when it began development of the fourth-generation Camry four years ago. The car's upscale features and performance had pushed its average price to more than \$20,000.

"They had gotten to a point where they had made it a premium car," Harbour said. "It was a baby Lexus."

Customers will notice, however, that Toyota no longer offers the Camry in a coupe or station wagon; the '97 Camry is available only as a four-door sedan. This further cuts manufacturing costs and helps simplify the assembly process at the plant - especially when Toyota's next - generation mini-van, replacing the Previa, begins production next summer.

The new Camry features a somewhat sportier styling to appeal to younger buyers, but it is not a revolutionary change like the new Taurus, with its heavy emphasis on ovals.

"It doesn't stand out from the crowd, but it is tidy and crisp, not round and boring like the previous one," said Barry Winfield of Road & Track, who tested a five-speed '97 Camry last week.

Both engines are slightly more powerful (up 8 horsepower in the four-cylinder, 6 horsepower in the V6). The interior has been upgraded to meet all safety standards scheduled in the next few years, including the 1997 side-impact and 1999 head-impact requirements.