

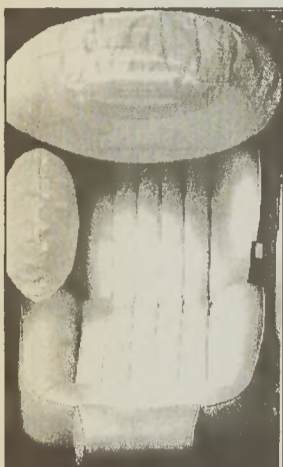
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AUTO SHOWCASE

TEST DRIVE

Air bags no longer priority, some say

By Brian S. Akre
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



ATLANTA — With more people worried about news reports of air bags' danger, fewer are focusing on those and other safety devices when shopping for cars.

In an annual survey, 57 percent of the respondents said air bags were an important factor in their decision to buy a car in the past year, down from 82 percent in last year's survey, said market research firm The Dohring Co.

The firm said Sunday that 88 percent of respondents said they were somewhat concerned about reports that air bags can harm children and short adults in some accidents. But the survey showed some consumers have major misconceptions about the extent of the threat.

"They're talking about decapitation, suffocation ... it's just unbelievable," said Dohring vice president Rik Kinney.

The number of respondents who said air bags were not important at all increased to 24 percent from 6 percent a year ago.

Air bags, which inflate at speeds up to 200 mph, have been blamed for the deaths of 35 children and 20 adults in low-speed accidents they otherwise would have survived. They also are estimated to have saved 1,700 lives in higher-speed crashes.

Most of the victims were not wearing seat belts. Air bags are intended to save lives in conjunction with seat belts. Most of the adult victims were smaller women, and about one-third were elderly.

Of those surveyed, 96 percent said they had heard news reports about air bags' potential threat and 92 percent said they were concerned about air bags. Harm to children was the concern cited most, at 45 percent.

Kinney said news reports about safety issues strongly affect the choice of which vehicle consumers buy — 88 percent said they were at least somewhat influenced by such reports.

It was the first time since the survey began in 1993 that the importance of safety equipment declined in consumers' minds, Kinney said. And it was not just air bags that were affected — the importance of anti-lock brakes and traction control also was ranked lower this year, though the drop was less dramatic.

The telephone survey of 1,253 randomly selected adults intending to buy a new or used car from a new car dealership was conducted in January. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8 percentage points.

The results were released during the National Automobile Dealers Association's annual convention in Atlanta.



1997 Ford Expedition, Eddie Bauer edition

PHOTO BY MARK PENDERGRASS

Ford's Expedition jumps to head of the class



Winfred B. Cross

Good things come to those who wait, or so the cliché goes.

I waited a long time to drive Ford's impressive new Tahoe-fighter, the Expedition. I even flew to Atlanta for the second introduction (the first was in Alaska, to which I was not invited), only to be stuck in a Explorer the whole time. I didn't feel I was slumming because I do like Explorers,

but I traveled to drive the Expedition.

Recently, I got my chance to drive the big sport ute for about a week and a half. I've used impressive already, haven't I? Well, I'll just have to think of more worthy adjectives to describe Ford's new home run.

Let's start with the looks. Ford has based the Expedition on the new-for-'97 F-150 pickup, the world's best-selling vehicle for a number of years. All of the refinements used in the F-150 have been passed to the Expedition. The grill is much like the up level F-150 — a wire mesh looking thing instead of the base truck's egg-crate look.

Viewed from the rear, the Expedition looks much like an

Explorer. You don't notice how much bigger the latter is from the former until they sit side by side.

The Expedition sits on a 119-inch wheelbase. It's 204.6 inches long and 78.6 inches wide. Its curb weight is massive, tipping the scales at

4,850 pounds.

And yes, it will fit into most garages.

The vehicle is of body-on-frame construction, is rear wheel driven and has 2.5 mph bumpers, which is typical for a truck.

What isn't typical is the inte-



Toyota to dealers: learn how to deal with smart consumers

By Brian S. Akre
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — Traditional auto dealers can prosper alongside the new megadealers if they change quickly to meet the demands of increasingly sophisticated consumers, a senior Toyota executive told dealers Saturday.

Much of the talk about a revolution in automotive retailing, driven by the growth in used-car superstores and publicly traded megadealers, has been overstated, said Yale Gieszl, vice president of Toyota Motor Sales USA Inc.

"These changes are evolutionary and present a tremendous opportunity for traditional dealers," Gieszl told the opening session of the National Automobile Dealers Association's annual convention. "However, evolution could become revolution unless automakers and dealers work together to meet rising and changing customer expectations."

The threat posed by the growing chains of used-car superstores, such as CarMax and AutoNation USA, was a big topic at last year's NADA convention. This year, dealers see the threat as personified by H. Wayne Huizenga, the Blockbuster video entrepreneur behind AutoNation's tremendous growth.

In the past year, Huizenga has been on a \$2 billion buying binge. He bought Alamo Rent A Car and National Car Rental to provide a steady stream of late-model used cars to his big AutoNation used-car lots. He has also been buying new-car dealerships to give him better access to late-model cars coming off lease.

To lure customers, Huizenga uses low-pressure sales techniques, no-haggle prices, and large selections that potential buyers can scan at computer kiosks in big, clean showrooms. It's a significant departure from the back lots dedicated to used cars at many traditional dealerships.

"An industry that has been slow to change is now being bombarded from all sides with new technology, new ideas, new channels and new players," Gieszl said. "Some are saying the retail system automakers and dealers have built over the last eight or nine decades has become a dinosaur."

Traditional dealers have many advantages that compensate for the size and capital of the new players, Gieszl said. They include a long relationship with their customers, a full range of after-sale services, an intimate knowledge of local markets and good locations.

To compete with the megadealers, traditional dealers will have to work harder, starting with better-trained and motivated sales staffs who are more attuned to customers' needs, he said.

"A growing number of consumers are arriving in your showrooms better prepared than ever. Quite often, they know more than your sales staff about the product they want."

Today's consumers also value their time and want the buying process to be simple and stress-free, Gieszl said.

"Consumers are driving the changes in automotive retailing," he said. "They are seeking ways to manage their scarcest resource time. And they appreciate companies that help them by offering

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Chrysler says latch didn't fail in crash



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SANTA ROSA, N.M. — Chrysler attorneys deny a faulty latch on one its minivans caused a death and injuries in a rollover crash in which nine victims seek \$100 million in damages from the automaker.

David Abercrombie of Dallas and eight others were involved in the July 1995 crash on Interstate 40 in Milagro, N.M. Dao Nguyen, 70, was killed and five other people were injured.

The group was traveling from Dallas to Anaheim, Calif., for a visit to Disneyland.

Abercrombie's attorney said Van Nguyen, 38, lost her arm after the rear door popped open during the crash and her shoulder was crushed against a guardrail.

"It was like a war zone out there on the highway with bodies flung everywhere and blood and ambulances and helicopters," Abercrombie's attorney, Art Solon, said during opening arguments this week.

But the automaker denies its latches are defective and contends the van's occupants

were thrown out of side windows.

Chrysler attorney David Tyrrell said the company cares about those who drive its vehicles, including its own employees and their families.

"Their children ride as passengers in those vehicles," he said.

In 1995, Chrysler asked more than 4 million owners of the vans to bring them in for free installation of a stronger liftgate latch. Tyrrell denied allegations that the automaker could have had a full recall and inexpensively replaced the latches for 25 to 50 cents each.

"I will tell you that Chrysler spends 25 to 50 cents to make improvements on its vehicles — not just minivans, but on all of its vehicles — very, very frequently," he said. "And it would not hold back 25 to 50 cents to not make an improvement on a vehicle that it thought would be a safety improvement."

At least 37 people have died in accidents in which they were ejected when liftgates opened on Chrysler Town and Country, Dodge Caravan or Plymouth Voyager minivans sold from 1984 through 1995, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

rior. There are passenger cars that do not possess this kind of ergonomic superiority. Ford has set the standard for American car ergonomics and its passed that on to its truck department. Everything in the Expedition is easy to read and reach. The dash looks much like an Explorer's, only much bigger. The gauges are huge and plentiful. Warning lights abound, but are unobtrusive. There are plenty of gadgets, but not gimmicks.

The seats are big and comfortable. My test vehicle was an Eddie Bauer Edition, so power seats were standard. The optional leather was exceptionally comfortable as well. The seating arrangement was seven passengers, but it can be configured for five, six or nine. Nine-passenger seating requires bench seats all around. I've never been big on three-abreast seating so the seven passenger arrangement would be my pick. If you need luggage space, forget the extra seats in the back, which are primarily for kids anyway. Luckily, my vehicle had a handy roof rack. I didn't need to use it, but I appreciated the convenience.

Notwithstanding, the rear-most seats, everyone else will find the Expedition very comfortable. Hip, head and leg room is generous. Five people wouldn't complain on a long trip. Kids would appreciate the rear-most seats, but adults would demand frequent stops to stretch.

You won't get many complaints about the engine, either. The optional 5.4-liter Triton V8 is a true workhorse. It churns out 230 horsepower with 325 pounds-feet of torque at a very low 3,000 rpm. Equipped as such, it can tow 8,000 pounds in two-wheel

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