

# 16B AUTO SHOWCASE

Toyota's restyled Camry is the best selling passenger car in the nation.

## GM's back? The General's sales pick up during July

By Brian S. Akre  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT - General Motors Corp. said expanded rebates and other incentives helped boost its U.S. sales of cars and light trucks 6 percent in July over year-ago levels, its biggest sales gain this year.

Cross-town rival Chrysler Corp., meanwhile, on Friday reported a 9 percent sales decline for the same month - its sixth straight month of slower sales.

Among foreign automakers reporting Friday, Honda Motor Co. said its sales increased an impressive 32 percent on strong demand for its Accord and Civic cars. Toyota Motor Corp.'s U.S. sales grew 15 percent.

But it was GM's strong showing that caught Wall Street analysts off guard, coming as it did after a dismal June performance that saw the automaker's market share for that month fall to 28.4 percent.

"These are surprising numbers," said analyst David Healy of Burnham Securities Inc. "It makes last month look more like a fluke."

Mike DiGiovanni, GM's market research chief, said the company was surprised in June by how aggressively its domestic competitors had played the rebate game. GM's sales momentum also was hurt that month by major assembly plant strikes in Oklahoma City and Pontiac, Mich.

"June was a horrible month for us," he said. "July reflects us getting back more on track. As we build our new products in the second half and have greater availability, we're hoping we get more momentum."

GM officials said a change in incentive strategy also was paying dividends. In the past, the company offered dealers a "carryover allowance," a 5 percent discount on the previous year's models left on lots after the new model year began Oct. 1.

That gave dealers an incentive to hold onto their inventory until October, while some customers waited until the fall to buy, knowing they could get a better price.

"It didn't really make a lot of sense," GM finance manager Joe McCusker said.

This year, the automaker is instead targeting that money on rebates and other incentives on older, slower selling models during the summer.

"That may have had a lot to do with these good July numbers," Healy said.

GM increased its rebates on several models in mid-July, and sales in the second half of the month were much stronger than the first. Even showroom dogs like the Chevrolet Camaro and Pontiac Firebird sport coupes showed modest sales gains last month, thanks to \$1,250 rebates.

Demand for GM and Chrysler minivans continued to improve in July, with Chrysler posting a July record at 50,547 units. GM said sales of its three minivan models, redesigned for '97, were up 80 percent for the first seven months of the year compared with the same period of 1996.

Spokesman Andy Boyd of American Honda Motor Co. credited the Japanese automaker's big gain on improved inventories of the hot-selling Accord, Civic and CR-V, Honda's new, car-based sport utility vehicle. The subcompact Civic, with sales up 51 percent, posted its best July ever.

Toyota's sales were led by record July demand for the Camry sedan, so far the year's best-selling car in the United



## Make mine 4x4

Toyota's RAV-4 has lost some luster, but still charms



Toyota's RAV-4, in four-door configuration, has aggressive good looks. Some don't like the gray undercladding. Still, sales are strong.



Winfred B. Cross

The fastest growing segments of the Sport Utility Vehicle market are the entry and luxury level. Buyers are gobbling up the most spartan and luxurious versions of these trucks.

Toyota started the ball rolling last year with the RAV-4 (Recreational Activity Vehicle with four-wheel drive), a cute-as-a-button, funky little thing that was an immediate smash.

The RAV is available in two- or four-door versions with two- or four-wheel drive. I spent some time in a two-door 4x4 last year, which I liked a great deal, but wished for more room.

Toyota granted my wish. I recently spent a week in a 4-door RAV. I still like it, but the shine of the little SUV has dulled a bit.

Looks are fine. A few friends told me they don't like the

thick, gray under cladding. I think it makes the vehicle look more aggressive. Toyota should consider a version without the cladding.

The vehicle's interior is well put together, but could use a dose of happiness. The drab, gray plastic isn't very inviting. The seat fabric was a wild striped pattern, added this year to brighten things up. It works to a point.

I did like the simplicity of the dash. The tachometer and speedometer were fairly large and there was a temperature gauge. An idiot light served as a warning for low oil pressure.

The steering wheel was thick and easy to grip. Even with a driver's air bag, the whole center of the wheel could be pressed for the horn. No silly buttons to hunt. A passenger's air bag is included as well.

The front seats were comfortable, but passengers complained there wasn't a comfortable arm rest. Billy Harris, The Post's long-legged graphic artist, found the seat annoying. The cushion was at a sloped angle, which put his knees nearly in his chest. There didn't seem to be a lot of leg room

either. Some of that was sacrificed to give more storage space. But the vehicle is clearly superior in space to the two-door version.

Billy also didn't like the awkward entry in the rear. The doors aren't very wide, which made it difficult getting in and out.

Driving the RAV-4 proves that Toyota got everything else right.

The four-wheel independent suspension gives the truck a very car-like manner. That

should come as no surprise. The RAV shares parts with past Camrys (engine), Corollas (switch gear) and Celicas (4x4 system). This makes the truck very agile and easy on the bumps.

More sound deadening material has been added to the dash, so noise from the gutsy little 2.0-liter engine is subdued. Wind still whistles around the mirrors and the tires making their share of racket. Overall,

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The two-door RAV is cuter, but the back seat is best for packages.

## Big wheels keep on turning, but are cars, drivers safe?

By Richard Cole  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The tractor-trailer, packed with trash, weighed 40 tons - roughly 76,000 pounds more than the Ford Explorer it was about to crush.

"Oh my God," thought Lillian Carch, "doesn't he see us here?"

The truck lurched over the lane divider and struck the side of the utility vehicle. Desperate, Peter Carch floored it, but the 18-wheeler veered into the car a second time, catching the rear of the Explorer and spinning it around 180 degrees.

"I could see his lights coming directly at us ...," said Mrs. Carch. "He came at us real hard. There was a tremendous impact."

And then this Pennsylvania family - Peter and Lillian, and their 18-year-old daughter, Laura - joined a statistical community, the 100,000 Americans who are



injured each year in one-sided confrontations with the big rigs that increasingly dominate the nation's roads.

The big trucks are relied upon to deliver the things Americans want to buy to the places where they want to buy them. "As long

as we keep consuming, and building Best Buy stores, people are going to expect that those stores have the products they advertise," said Chris Hoover, a spokesman for the American Trucking Associations.

But there is a price that must be

paid, and on the evening of March 24, 1995, on Interstate 78 in New Jersey, the bill came due for the Carches.

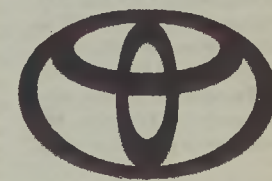
Lillian and Peter, though battered and bruised, were saved by their seat belts. But the impact hurled Laura - state tennis champ, high school homecoming queen - 32 feet onto the pavement, snapping her neck.

Five-thousand people lose their lives in collisions with trucks each year. Doctors saved Laura. Though they said she would never walk again, by June 1997 she was able - just barely - to hit a tennis ball over the net.

The driver of the truck was unhurt. In fact, he drove away without stopping; he later told authorities that he was unaware that he had hit a car. He thought it was just a deer, he said.

Truck traffic has jumped 25 percent on the nation's highways

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## Toyota puts up fight with Republic

By Brian S. Akre  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT - Toyota took legal action in California in its expanding effort to prevent Republic Industries Inc. from buying too many of its franchised dealerships.

Toyota Motor Sales USA Inc., the Japanese automaker's U.S. sales arm based near Los Angeles, petitioned the state New Motor Vehicle Board to block Republic's planned purchase of Anderson Lexus in Fremont, Calif.

The latest action follows similar moves in Arizona, Texas and Florida. Toyota says Republic has refused to abide by the automaker's contractual limits on the ownership of multiple dealerships.

Republic, run by billionaire H. Wayne Huizenga, didn't own a single dealership in December, but since then it has become the world's largest dealer group. As of Thursday, it owned or was in the process of completing the purchase of 150 dealerships nationwide.

Republic spokesman Jim Donahue said Toyota's recent moves were aimed at intimidating other dealers so they would not sell to Republic. Both sides have been negotiating on and off for months.

"We think it's so much posturing by Toyota," Donahue said. "They know that we are working with them behind the scenes to resolve the situation as quickly as possible."

Toyota and Honda Motor Co. have been fighting Republic for fear of losing control over their dealer networks. The Big Three, which have far more U.S. dealers than their Japanese counterparts, have been cooperating with Republic, hoping it can help consolidate and improve their dealer networks.

About a year ago, Toyota adopted policies limiting an individual or group to no more than seven Toyota franchises and three Lexus franchises. Toyota also imposed a nine-month waiting period between purchases.

Donahue said Toyota's policies are contrary to franchise and contract laws, and that Republic is confident it will prevail if the automaker continues to press the issue before the regulatory agencies.

Republic so far owns two Toyota dealerships and is in the process of buying nine other Toyota dealerships and five Lexus franchises. Toyota says Republic plans to acquire 59 Toyota dealerships in the top 50 markets.

Toyota contends Republic, which has major holdings in the trash-hauling business, lacks sufficient automotive industry experience. It says Republic's aggressive business plan to become a nationwide, one-stop automotive sales, rental and service conglomerate is untested and risky.

Republic has cast itself as a maverick company trying to change an inefficient, tradition-bound business for the better. It said it has "the most solid and experienced management team in automotive retailing."