

Auto news

Electric car strategy: follow the fleet

LIKE other automakers, Ford Motor Company is betting heavily on electric vehicles as the economy recovers. That decision has been powering the prospects of Azure Dynamics, a company that makes electric drive trains and other components for hybrid commercial fleet vehicles.

Recently, Ford and Azure unveiled the 2011 Transit Connect Electric, the car-maker's first foray into the electric vehicle market. It has an 80-mile range and recharges in six to eight hours.



Cat-calling men give all men a bad name?

MEN who harass women who are walking or driving, with cat calls are actually harming their whole gender, a study has found. The research by Stephenie Chaudoir looked into the feelings and reactions of women who saw and heard men making derogatory remarks to other women.

The study showed that in addition to feeling upset, women were more likely to take the remark as an insult to their gender, and feel greater anger and motivation to take direct action toward men in general.



500 Vipers will be built between now and mid-July 2010. Among those 500 cars will be a mildly tweaked ACR, and the new CR X, intended as a track-only spec racer for Viper fanatics

Viper lives: Chrysler is keeping its iconic supercar

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VIPER'S back, and it's here to stay, declares new Dodge chief Ralph Gilles. "2009 was a bad year for owners and a bad year for the car," says Gilles of the persistent stories the Viper franchise was to be sold off. "But it woke the whole Viper nation. Everyone realised how special it is."

While the Cerberus regime failed to understand the Viper's potential as a halo car for the company, it needed no explaining to Sergio Marchionne and his team, continues Gilles. Marchionne has committed to building 500 Vipers between now and mid-July. Among those 500 cars will be a mildly tweaked ACR, and the new CR X, intended as a track-only spec racer for Viper fanatics.

"This will be a bridge to the new car," adds Gilles. "I can develop that in peace." The new Viper will likely appear in 2012.

While refusing to divulge details, Gilles says the next Viper will definitely be V-10-powered, and the engine will be a



The interior of Dodge Viper.

version of the current Chrysler-developed 8.4-litre unit. It will not, as has been speculated on the Internet, be powered by a V-10 version of a new modular powerplant under development by Ferrari. Gilles says remarks he made about potentially leveraging Ferrari's expertise were misunderstood: "Ferrari is a great resource for expertise on advanced technolo-

gies, materials, and chassis development. But there will be no sharing of parts or components."

Gilles also discounts rumours the next Viper may switch to a V-8: "The Viper will always be V-10," he insists, though he doesn't rule out building a V-8 sports car using some of the new Viper's hardware. "If it had a different engine, it would have a different nameplate. Maybe one

with a snake theme." Remember the Copperhead concept?

Gilles notes that the next Viper will have a much more stylish interior and use some advanced materials to further reduce weight—though not too many, as he does not want to push the car's price point too high. "My biggest conundrum: What is enough power?"

The popular perception is the 600-horse V-10 is big and heavy. It's long, but it actually weighs less than a Hemi V-8. The current Viper's front-to-rear weight distribution is 49/51, and the engine is offset 15 mm to the passenger side, so the left/right balance is pretty good too. The current V-10 is also good through 2013 in terms of emissions.

Gilles wants to look at what can be done with the powertrain to improve performance and efficiency. A dual-clutch transmission may be on the agenda. SRT engineers say it would probably be worth 0.6 second around Laguna Seca, say, and therefore probably three seconds or more a lap at the Nordschleife. But the feeling is there would always be a conventional stick available too.



Dodge Viper

Tiny Bubbles

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MEET the P-NUT from Honda, the latest entrant in the strangely effervescent arena of pint-size pod cars. To the comely blonde models, slowly spinning turntables, and acres of cheap carpet, we can add tiny bubble-car concepts as an auto-show fixture. At the recent Los Angeles show, Honda presented the P-NUT. The too-cute name is an acronym for Personal-Neo Urban Transport. More than two feet shorter than a Fit, the P-NUT seats three and has its (hypothetical) powertrain located at the rear. Honda says it could use a gasoline engine, battery power, or a hybrid of the two. Dave Marek, head of Honda's US design studio, argues that America is a legitimate venue for cars like this. "We need urban cars as much as anywhere

Honda recently presented the pint-size pod car called P-NUT which could use a gasoline engine, battery power, or a hybrid of the two

else, given the economic climate today," he says.

In addition to being an unproven business prospect, these vehicles also lack a consensus with regard to their ideal layout. Most have their engines in the rear, but the iQ uses a more conventional front engine and front-wheel drive.

These cars also display surprising variety in their seating configurations. The P-NUT has a one-plus-two layout. The iQ is a two-plus-two, although Toyota says it seats three adults and one child. The Nissan Land Glider and Volkswagen's L1 concept cars seat two in tandem. The Smart is a more conventional (side-by-side) two-seater.

As to their overall shape, "The Smart and the iQ have it right," says our own design editor, Robert Cumberford. "A really small car has to be fairly tall to be seen among SUVs in heavy traffic. Low, narrow fuselages, such as the VW L1 or the Nissan Land Glider, are entirely too scary to be successfully marketed for intense urban use."

Despite all the uncertainty surrounding these miniature machines, it's clear that the notion of minimalist motoring is one that has an outsized hold on the world's carmakers.



Honda's P-NUT