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Auto Show Season Brings Big Changes for Many Brands

What's on the product horizon from the nation's most innovative automakers?

by [Jim Koscs](#)

This year's auto show season brought a significant number of new vehicle announcements and introductions, many with an overlying message: transition. Eight companies told AIADA how their newest vehicles convey identity and direction for their respective brands.

Rear-Wheel Drive Revolution

Few took Hyundai seriously when, a few years ago, it quietly showcased a large, home-market rear-wheel drive sedan called the Equus. Yet few were prepared for Hyundai's announcement at this year's New York International Auto Show -- the Genesis Concept.

A mid-size, rear-wheel drive sedan, Genesis is a thinly disguised prototype for an all-new model that will arrive in the second half of 2008. The Genesis appears aimed at the Infiniti G-series and Lexus IS and even GS models. Hyundai Motor America spokesman Miles Johnson confirmed that the new sedan would wear a Hyundai badge, even as the company explores the potential for a luxury channel. "Genesis will allow us to speak to driving enthusiasts and showcase our engineering," Johnson said. "Until Genesis, Hyundai had never had a car on the cover of Motor Trend."

Johnson added that the Genesis marketing strategy will give Hyundai something that Toyota and Honda franchises do not offer: a rear-wheel drive luxury/sport model. He pointed out, though, that the Genesis marks an expansion rather than sea change for the brand. "We're not walking away from Accent and Elantra," he said. Genesis will debut the brand's new 300-plus horsepower V-8 and also offer a V-6 model that will start at under \$30,000.

Thinking Inside the Box

Toyota's Scion brand made boxy cool with the diminutive xB model. The second-generation xB, introduced at the Chicago Auto Show, is decidedly less diminutive, yet still compact, and is also much more powerful. A 2.4-liter engine replaces the previous model's 1.5-liter unit.

In making such big (literally) changes, is Toyota tampering with Scion's success? Steve Haag, Scion corporate manager, said no. "The all-new xB was designed with the help of our passionate owner body. No other automotive company listens to their customers like we do. Our xB owners wanted a larger vehicle with a more powerful engine."

Scion also replaced the xA hatchback with the new xD, also slightly larger and more powerful than its predecessor with a

1.8-liter engine. All Scion models for 2008 receive the new Scion family front design, described by Haag as a "menacing horizontal combination of headlights and grille." Standard equipment and safety features have been expanded, and the list of available accessories is even longer than before. What doesn't change, said Haag, is "a strategy to keep our models surprising, versatile, exclusive and personalization-friendly."

Big Fun in a Little Box

Kia this year introduced its next small crossover utility vehicle, the Soul Concept. The play-on-words touts its Korean origins (Seoul is the capital of South Korea). Kia Motors America Marketing VP Ian Beavis described the Soul as a "halo model," a term not usually associated with low-priced vehicles. Halo in this sense means the Soul conveys the essence (or "soul") of the brand in a volume model.

Conceding that current Kia products have rather blend-in styling, Beavis said the Soul kicks off a new era in expressive design for Kia while maintaining the brand's value story. The boxy Soul enters the market space opened up by the Scion xB and also occupied by the Chevrolet HHR and the Honda Element. The production version, due for 2008, will carry the concept car's silhouette but will have conventional doors in place of the concept's center-opening rear doors.

Asked how the Soul fits the brand's "Exciting and Enabling" credo, Beavis said, "Exciting doesn't necessarily mean the biggest engine on the block." The value, he added, will enable buyers to enjoy their lifestyles with this vehicle. The Soul Concept is powered by a 2.0-liter 4-cylinder engine.

New Mercedes C-Class Reflects Dealer Ideas

Robert Allan, product manager for the third-generation 2008 Mercedes-Benz C-Class coming this summer, said this car reflects far more input from Mercedes dealers than any of its predecessors did. The first-generation C-Class offered a "Sport" upgrade package that tightened the handling; the current C-Class elevated "Sport" to a trim line, which currently accounts for about 65 percent of C-Class volume. Yet, customers and dealers lamented that the 4MATIC all-wheel drive option was not available with the Sport trim line.

The all-new 2008 C-Class will offer a separate Sport model series, clearly delineated by design, feature content, and handling performance. The 2008 C-Class Sport models wear the brand's "coupe" front end styling, which uses a simpler grille with a large star emblem in place of the C-Class Luxury models' traditional Mercedes grille and hood ornament.

The differences are more than skin deep. Allan points out that the Sport models get special suspension tuning and wheels, AMG exterior styling and unique interiors. Dealers asked for -- and received -- expanded standard equipment, simplified ordering and option packages, and the 4MATIC option on both the C300 Sport and Luxury models. (The 3.5-liter C350 is available as a rear-wheel drive Sport model only.)

Seeing Around the Corner and Into the Future

Infiniti, too, fielded a concept vehicle at the New York Auto Show, the EX. Company spokesman Kyle Bazemore said the EX Concept is "about 85 percent" true to the production EX35 model due by year's end. The venue selected for the production model's debut, the glamorous Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance this August, says much about Infiniti's confidence in the rakish new design.

Smaller than the current FX crossover utility vehicle, the EX does not replace it. Bazemore expects the EX's coupe-like styling to attract new customers to the brand. The EX35 will compete with the BMW X3 and Acura RDX. World technology firsts include the Around View Monitor (AVM) camera system that reduces blind spots, and the Lane Departure Warning

System. Infiniti will introduce another world technology first at the Los Angeles Auto Show.

Bazemore said dealers are excited about the EX, but probably not as excited as the woman who called him during the auto show press conference asking when she could buy one. She'd seen the EX on the "Good Morning America" TV show earlier in the morning, and, by the time the conference had begun, had used the Internet to track down a press release with Bazemore's cell phone number.

Mainstream Doesn't Mean Dull

Mitsubishi last month bucked the industry trend by selling more cars than it did in April 2006. Two big reasons were the Outlander crossover SUV, introduced late last year, and the new-generation Lancer compact sedan introduced at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit. Both models are built on a new global platform.

The new Lancer is larger, more powerful and better equipped than its predecessor, which had a difficult time standing out in a crowded field. Company spokesperson Janis Little said that like Outlander, Lancer's appeal is grounded in bringing Mitsubishi core brand attributes -- expressive styling and performance -- into a high-volume segment.

Little said that, to stand apart in the compact sedan segment, Lancer had to offer standout features, among them a standard 152-horsepower engine and an available continuously variable transmission (CVT) with magnesium paddle shifters (GTS model). High-tech options include a hard-drive navigation system with music file capability, plus a high-power audio system.

Standing Out in a Growing Crowd

Another compact taking on the mainstream with stand-apart performance and features is the 2008 Subaru Impreza, unveiled for the first time at the New York Auto Show. Shown in base 2.5i and WRX turbocharged performance variants, the Impreza will come in sedan and 5-door models, the 5-door replacing the previous wagon and looking more sporty. (Tim Colbeck, VP Sales, Subaru of America, explained the importance of the redesigned Impreza series in a recent interview with AIADA contributor Marty Bernstein.)

True Coupe at Last

Audi has not marketed a coupe in the U.S. since after the 1991 model year, so the A5 coming for 2008 marks a major change in strategy for the brand. Company spokesman Chris Bokich said the A5 coupe, while sharing mechanical elements with other Audi models, is a separate model series, not a variation on another body style as its previous coupes had been. The A5 also demonstrates Audi's vehicle construction flexibility.

"The A5 is indicative of what is to come on future Audi models, both in terms of extroverted exterior and interior design, as well as technically regarding the modular-structure technology," said Bokich. "We have moved away from platforms and are now mixing and matching skeletal underbody components that can efficiently produce vehicles of differing length, width, and height." In the U.S., the A5 and its S5 sport model sibling will come exclusively with the brand's quattro all-wheel drive technology.

Inspiration from a Rich Past

Maserati, enjoying a resurgence based in large part on the Quattroporte sedan, gets back to its roots with the 2008 GranTurismo coupe. Although the previous Maserati coupe evoked a few classic brand design elements, the new GranTurismo draws more directly from the company's rich and varied heritage for inspiration. The grille, for example, is pure

1950s-era Maserati racecar, and the long-hood proportions recall the legendary Maserati front-engine GT coupes of the 1950s and 1960s.

"The GranTurismo is a true Maserati at first glance. It has already garnered global admiration and we are proud to now bring it to North America," commented James Selwa, President and CEO of Maserati North America. The new model also builds on a successful brand strategy. "Maserati has become a competitive, credible choice in the \$100,000 plus range, no small feat given the strong field of competitors in our segment," Selwa added.

Jim Koscs is president of AudaMotive Communications, Inc., which specializes in product and speech writing for auto industry clients.

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