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DEARBORN, Mich. (AP) — Ford Motor Co. said Tuesday it earned \$2.1 billion in the first quarter, another sign the economy is improving as people spend more on big-ticket items like cars. The automaker expects to be solidly profitable this year, a year earlier than its previous guidance.

Ford said its net income per share was 50 cents during the quarter. That's an about-face from the same period last year when it lost \$1.4 billion, or 60 cents per share, at the height of the recession. It was Ford's highest quarterly profit in six years.

The company was profitable in its key North American market, but it also made money in Asia, South America and Europe.

"The Ford team around the world achieved another very solid quarter, and we are delivering profitable growth," Ford CEO Alan Mulally said in a statement.

Revenue rose 15 percent to \$28.1 billion.

Ford reported a one-time gain of \$188 million related to the sale of its Volvo brand to Geely Holding Group, which was completed at the end of March. That was offset by a \$63 million loss from personnel reductions and dealer payments.

Analysts polled by Thomson Reuters had expected revenue of \$30.5 billion and a profit of 31 cents per share. Analysts typically don't account for one-time items.

Ford's U.S. sales climbed 37 percent for the quarter and its market share rose nearly three percentage points. The company made \$1.2 billion in North America, which had been draining cash in prior years.

It also reported an 84 percent sales increase in China.

In a sign of its confidence in the economic recovery, Ford said it's boosting North American production in the second quarter to 625,000 vehicles, a 9 percent increase over first-quarter levels. The increase could mean additional hiring by Ford, but Chief Financial Officer Lewis Booth said Tuesday it's too early to say if the company will be adding workers.

Ford, the only Detroit-area automaker to shun government aid and stay out of bankruptcy protection, gained market share from crosstown rivals General Motors Co. and Chrysler Group LLC. It also benefited from Toyota's safety recall problems.

The first-quarter profit was the fourth straight positive quarter for Ford, which has gradually cut costs and improved sales since the depths of the recession a year ago. Ford made \$2.7 billion last year.

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