

Toyota Unveils High-Tech Concept Car

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TOKYO (AP) — Toyota's president unveiled a futuristic concept car resembling a giant smartphone to demonstrate how Japan's top automaker is trying to take the lead in technology at the upcoming Tokyo auto show.

Toyota Motor Corp. will also be showing an electric vehicle, set for launch next year, and a tiny version of the hit Prius gas-electric hybrid at the Tokyo Motor Show, which opens to the public this weekend.

But the automaker's president, Akio Toyoda, chose to focus on the experimental Fun-Vii, which he called "a smartphone on four wheels" at Monday's preview of what Toyota is displaying at the show.

The car works like a personal computer and allows drivers to connect with dealers and others with a tap of a touch-panel door.

"A car must appeal to our emotions," Toyoda said, using the Japanese term "waku waku doki doki," referring to a heart aflutter with anticipation.

Toyota's booth will be a major attraction at the biannual Tokyo exhibition for the auto industry. Toyota said the Fun Vii was an example of what might be in the works in "20XX," giving no dates.

The Tokyo show has been scaled back in recent years as U.S. and European automakers increasingly look to China and other places where growth potential is greater. U.S. automaker Ford Motor Co. isn't even taking part in the show.

Toyota's electric vehicle FT-EV III, still a concept or test model, doesn't have a price yet, but is designed for short trips such as grocery shopping and work commutes, running 105 kilometers (65 miles) on one full charge.

The new small hybrid will be named Aqua in Japan, where it goes on sale next month. Overseas dates are undecided. Outside Japan it will be sold as a Prius.

Japan's automakers, already battered by years of sales stagnation at home, took another hit from the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, which damaged part suppliers in northeastern Japan, and forced the car makers to cut back production.

The forecast of demand for new passenger cars in Japan this year has been cut to 3.58 million vehicles from an earlier 3.78 million by the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association.

Toru Hatano, auto analyst for IHS Automotive in Tokyo, believes fuel efficient hybrid models will be popular with Japanese consumers, and Toyota has an edge.

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"The biggest obstacle has to do with costs, and you need to boost vehicle numbers if you hope to bring down costs" he said. "Toyota has more hybrids on the market than do rivals, and that gives Toyota an advantage."

Toyota has sold more than 3.4 million hybrids worldwide so far. Honda Motor Co., which has also been aggressive with hybrid technology, has sold 770,000 hybrids worldwide.

Toyota is also premiering a fuel-cell concept vehicle, FCV-R, at the show.

Zero-emission fuel cell vehicles, which run on hydrogen, have been viewed as impractical because of costs. Toyota said the FCV-R is a "practical" fuel-cell, planned for 2015, but didn't give its price.

"I felt as though my heart was going to break," Toyoda said of the turmoil after the March disaster. "It is precisely because we are in such times we must move forward with our dreams."

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