

Ford: New 7-Seater Not A Minivan

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DEARBORN, Mich. (AP) — It looks like a minivan. It has sliding doors like a minivan. So why isn't Ford calling its new seven-seater a minivan?

For the same reason you don't wear mom jeans or listen to Barry Manilow: It's not cool.

The Transit Connect Wagon will debut later this month at the Los Angeles Auto Show. It's set to go on sale late next fall.

To the average buyer — or, in fact, to everyone outside of Ford Motor Co. — it will appear that Ford is getting back into the minivan business after a six-year hiatus. The Transit Connect Wagon, which is based on Ford's Transit Connect commercial van, has the high roof of the van but trades its industrial-looking hood for the tapered nose and trapezoid grille of Ford's cars. It has sliding doors on both sides and comes in five-seat and seven-seat versions.

The new vehicle will have two four-cylinder engine options, one of which will get 30 miles per gallon or more on the highway. That would make it the most fuel-efficient minivan on the market — if it was a minivan. But Ford insists it's not.

"It's anything but a minivan," said David Mondragon, Ford's general manager of marketing. "In our mind, it's a people mover. We think of it as more of a utility, or kind of a hybrid sport utility, than a minivan."

Mondragon says the m-word is too polarizing and turns off Ford's target customers: 30- to 42-year-old parents who grew up with minivans and like their utility but don't want to sacrifice style. At one point, Ford even considered calling the wagon a "you-tility," but it turned out another carmaker already had dibs on that one.

"A lot of consumers in this segment are parents who still want their own identity," Mondragon said. "There's a lot of blandness in the industry, especially in regard to multi-passenger vehicles. They want something fresh and uniquely styled."

The Transit Connect Wagon has a different look than the average minivan. The roof is higher, the windshield has a steeper slant and it's got a sturdier, more industrial look.

But more importantly for Ford, the Transit Connect Wagon will be priced like a minivan. The company's current seven-seaters, the Flex wagon and Explorer SUV, cost \$30,000 or higher. While Ford isn't releasing a price for the new vehicle yet, Mondragon says it will compete at the lower end of the market with vehicles like the Dodge Grand Caravan, a minivan that starts at \$19,995.

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Dealers say the vehicle fills a void in Ford's lineup. The company stopped making the Freestar minivan in 2006, citing falling demand as customers swarmed to new crossovers like the Ford Escape. But the decision cost it some customers who needed the utility of a minivan, says Terry Kidd, who owns Kidd Ford Lincoln in Morrison, Tenn.

"We still sell used minivans. It's a very popular body style," he said.

Kidd says the Transit Connect Wagon should be as good — if not better — than other minivans on the market. That's a far cry from the clunky, inefficient Freestar, which had trouble competing with industry leaders like the Honda Odyssey.

Ford has been selling a five-passenger version of the Transit Connect van since 2010, but it's designed for commercial use and has few creature comforts. The new version will offer lots of bells and whistles, including a panoramic sunroof, leather seats, third-row seats that slide back and forth and the MyFordTouch entertainment system. Its second- and third-row seats fold down to create 100 cubic feet of cargo space behind the first row, or about 20 cubic feet less than the Nissan Quest minivan.

U.S. minivan sales peaked at 1.37 million in 2000; by last year, they had fallen to 472,398. About 3 percent of new vehicle buyers are purchasing minivans now, down from 6 percent a decade ago, according to Strategic Vision, a consulting firm. Alexander Edwards, who heads Strategic Vision's automotive division, says Ford can move that needle, but it needs to show what makes the Transit Wagon different — its optional rear cargo doors, for example — and target nontraditional minivan buyers like aging parents and outdoor enthusiasts.

"Yes, the term minivan is polarizing, but for those who are open to a minivan-styled vehicle, most do not care or worry about such stigma," he said.

The Transit Connect Wagon will be made in Valencia, Spain, and exported to the U.S., Asia and Europe. Ford currently sells about 35,000 Transit Connects in the U.S. each year, and about 15 percent of those are the five-passenger wagon versions, which are used by taxi companies and others. It expects to double that with the new wagon.

Rebecca Lindland, an automotive analyst with IHS Global Insight, thinks Ford is worrying too much about focus groups. Cave in and call it a minivan, she says.

"It's a great-looking vehicle," she said. "I think they should celebrate the utility of it."

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