

Hybrids, Hype Roll Into Toronto Auto Show

Will Campbell, The Canadian Press

TORONTO - Hybrid engines going mainstream and a bumper year for new vehicle rollouts are expected to make this year's Canadian International Auto Show in Toronto one to watch.

Canada's leading auto festival marks its 40th anniversary with the Canadian debut of more than 40 cars, SUVs, trucks and concept vehicles.

And that's just a fraction of the 1,000 vehicles hoping to catch the eyes of hundreds of thousands of car lovers expected to attend the auto show, which begins Friday at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre.

Industry analyst Dennis DesRosiers said automakers will need to work hard to stand out at the show in a year that will see up to 70 new vehicles brought to market, more than double the usual number.

"We've never seen this much all-new product," said DesRosiers of DesRosiers Automotive Consultants Inc.

He said it will be key for auto firms to make sure their models make the right first impression as the crowd of Canadian dealers, automobile journalists and car enthusiasts leans in for a close look.

"It'll be very easy to stub their toe and get behind the 8 ball on something, and once you're starting to play catch-up it's really hard to be successful."

And with automakers coming off their best Canadian sales year in a decade while American sales saw a post-recession high, there should be plenty of optimism to go around on the show floor.

"The difficult times that this industry has faced appear to be behind them," DesRosiers said.

In the midst of the flood of glitzy vehicle premieres, DesRosiers says one trend to watch at the show is a low-key breakthrough for hybrid gas-electric vehicles, with the long-developing technology becoming a common option in new vehicle fleets.

"I'm expecting hybrids to become mainstream at this show, that there'll be not a lot of noise on hybrids, they'll just be introduced as one of the vehicles that you offer when you're putting out a new model," he said.

"The industry is really coalescing and the reality is that hybrid technology has developed to the point where it can be offered with minimal compromises to the consumer, and it's more accepted by the consumer now that it's been in the

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marketplace for 14 years."

He said diesel engines and fuel-efficiency tweaks to gas engines should also feature prominently.

"Between diesel and hybrids I'm expecting the vehicle companies to tip their hand that this is how they're going to meet (tighter) fuel economy regulations that are coming," DesRosiers said.

Vehicles getting introduced to Canada for the first time include the Cadillac ELR hybrid luxury coupe, the all-electric Chevrolet Spark EV, Chrysler SRT Viper sports car, Honda Accord hybrid sedan and the clean-diesel Mazda6.

DesRosiers said the show will be important for GM, which has been losing market share in Canada, and for Japanese automakers trying to counter popular Korean vehicles that have gained ground on their Asian rivals with bolder styling.

Among the concept cars ready to turn heads at the show is the Toyota Fun-Vii, which features an interactive outer surface drivers can dynamically adjust to show images or digitally paint through a slick tablet-style interface.

The festival of all things auto is putting an emphasis on green vehicles with an expanded "eco-drive" showcase, while another section of the floor is devoted to muscular hot-rods and Canadian custom-built rides.

The Canadian car of the year will be announced at a media event Thursday in a three-way contest between Honda, Hyundai and Porsche.

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