

Holiday Weekend Gives A Boost To Auto Sales

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) -- The holiday weekend was good to U.S. automakers, as sales reports indicate the auto industry is on track to beat strong sales numbers from a year ago.

Chrysler's U.S. sales rose a surprising 16 percent in November, while General Motors posted a 14 percent gain. Toyota sales rose 10 percent, and Ford notched a 7 percent increase.

"Industry sales in November picked up after Thanksgiving contributing to the best sales pace of the year," said Bill Fay, Toyota division group vice president and general manager.

One of the month's stars was the all-new Jeep Cherokee small crossover SUV, which notched the rare achievement of sales of more than 10,000 in its first full month on the market.

"That is a big number," said Jeff Schuster, senior vice president of auto sales forecasting for LMC Automotive, an industry consulting firm.

Overall, Chrysler sold just over 142,000 vehicles last month for its best November in six years, up from nearly 123,000 a year ago. Sales of Jeeps rose 30 percent, and the brand had its best November ever.

With the success of the Cherokee, Chrysler took advantage of a shift in the market toward smaller SUVs.

Erich Merkle, Ford's top sales analyst, said small crossover SUVs like the Cherokee and Ford Escape continued to gobble up market share during November, gaining two full percentage points over a year ago to 15.5 percent of U.S. sales. The gains came at the expense of small and midsize cars. Midsize cars fell one point to 14.5 percent, while small cars dropped a point to around 20 percent, Merkle said.

The Cherokee's sculpted look annoyed Jeep purists. But Schuster says the styling may have paid off. "It sends a signal that the Cherokee, which has been polarizing in the industry, may be appealing to consumers more than critics," he said.

Chrysler delayed Cherokee shipments for several months while engineers tinkered with its new nine-speed automatic transmission to make it shift more smoothly. Dealers didn't have a normal inventory until mid-November, the company said.

David Kelleher, owner of a Chrysler dealership in Glen Mills, Pa., outside Philadelphia, said his dealership sold 21 Cherokees last month. That helped the store reach its best November sales since Kelleher bought it eight years ago.

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Pickup trucks once again notched double-digit gains for the Detroit automakers. Sales of Ford's F-Series, the best-selling vehicles in the U.S., rose 16 percent to 65,501. GM reported sales of the Chevrolet Silverado, its best-seller, rose 12 percent, while sales of the GMC Sierra gained 23 percent. For Chrysler, sales of the Ram pickup increased by 22 percent.

Ahead of the reports, industry analysts estimated that total U.S. sales rose 3.6 percent to 6.3 percent for November. That's slower growth than earlier in the year, mainly because sales in November of 2012 were the best in nearly five years. Superstorm Sandy hit in October last year, delaying some East Coast sales until November.

All automakers report monthly sales figures on Tuesday.

Dealers contacted by The Associated Press all said sales started slowly, but they did well after Thanksgiving, boosting their monthly totals over November of last year.

"Black Friday did give us a lift," said Bill Perkins, president of two Chevrolet dealerships in the Detroit suburbs of Taylor and Eastpointe, Mich. "A lot of people were out shopping over the weekend."

Normally November is a lackluster month for auto sales. But automakers, particularly Ford and General Motors, offered deals this year that brought out buyers, according to the Kelley Blue Book auto website.

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