



LEADING BY EXAMPLE

THE AFTERMARKET AND THE AUTO MANUFACTURERS EACH HAVE SOMETHING TO TEACH THE OTHER.

BY LARRY EDSALL

Racers don't have time to waste, so they tend to get right to the point.

When asked why Ford Motor Company and other automakers spend time and money on an event that isn't even open to the car-buying public, Ford's director of racing Jamie Allison hit the bull's-eye.

The event in question was the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) Show of aftermarket automotive products in Las Vegas. The SEMA Show, Allison said, represents "the intersection of cars and car culture."

Unlike the North American International Auto Show at Detroit or any of the other major or local new car shows, SEMA is a trade show for parts and accessories designed to make cars go faster or look... I want to write the word "better" but some of the stuff is just so gaudy that, well, let's say look different than they did when they rolled off the assembly line.

Once upon a time, automakers didn't like it when their vehicles were modified, and they still don't if those modifications affect safety or ruin rather than enhance a car's visual appeal. But for the last decade or so, the automakers have had a large presence at the annual SEMA Show, and with SEMA's help have worked to upgrade the quality of the parts that customize and personalize a vehicle. In some cases, the automakers even provide aftermarket companies an early look at future products so accessories not only will be ready but will fit and function properly when a new vehicle becomes available to the car-buying public.

Now, said Ralph Gilles, head of Chrysler's SRT brand and former corporate design director, "we're happy to see our vehicles are being used as canvases"

The 2012 SEMA Show featured more than 2,000 exhibitors manufacturing thousands of products to enhance or customize the performance, safety, convenience, appearance and comfort of individual owners' vehicles. One overall SEMA Award is given for the biggest presence of one brand of vehicle in each of four categories (see next page), but products are available for every make and model imaginable. Exhibitors take their torches and paint guns to vehicles that cost \$20,000 or \$200,000—past, present or future—transforming them completely or simply outfitting them with a new gadget. Some of these projects will find their way to your garage, comprehensively or in part, some will find their way back to the manufacturers themselves, directly or as inspiration, and some will never make it beyond the SEMA Show floor.

Three manufacturers' entries: a 2012 Fiat 500 by MOPAR; Honda's IndyCar; and a Hyundai Accent; joined by a 2010 Aston Martin Vantage by Advan Carbon/Charge Speed USA/Premier4509/VeilSide.

Acura's future NSX arrives; a toyotafishing.com Tundra; a race-ready Mercedes-Benz coupe modified by Pirelli; and Bushwacker's Mazda CX-5.

A custom Ford Tudor; MacNeil's Weathertech Porsche 911; one of many hot Hyundai Veloster Turbos; and a Dodge Charger-Bentley cross-breed.

Toyota Prius; the brand new Ford Escape; a Cadillac CTS Coupe; and the well-represented Chevrolet Camaro, all in various degrees of modification.

for personalization.

Well, to an extent, he added, as he reached into his pocket to pull out his iPhone and share a photo he took of what he considers a customization gone wrong: someone had grafted the nose of a new Chevrolet Camaro to the four-door body of a Chrysler 300.

Chrysler, Ford and General Motors all had big displays at the show, and other automakers such as Toyota, Lexus, Scion, Honda, Hyundai, Kia and Mazda also showcased their cars. The OEMs use their own design departments and various partners—independent hot-rod shops and sometimes celebrities—to show how the automaker would modify the appearance or performance of its production vehicles.

Often, the OEMs even introduce concept cars at SEMA, just as if it were the Detroit or Frankfurt auto show.

"We try to lead by example," Gilles said, "to show how professional designers would approach this space, where a hot-rodder might put every idea he has into one car."

"The SEMA Show isn't about consumers, but enthusiasts, designers and

Photos courtesy of Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA)



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■ The SEMA Awards determine winners in each of four categories, based on which vehicles are represented most strongly at the show.

"The SEMA Award helps guide consumers toward the hottest-trending and most accessory-friendly vehicles on the market," said Chris Kersting, SEMA president and CEO. "Our SEMA Show exhibitors are industry visionaries who determine the winners of the SEMA Award based on the vehicles they showcase in their booths. Each booth vehicle represents a 'vote,' and the most prominent models in each category are the winners."

Shown at left are one example each of the vehicles that were SEMA Award winners for 2012: the Scion FR-S as the Hottest Sport Compact, the Ford F-Series as Hottest Truck, the Jeep® Wrangler as Hottest 4x4-SUV, and the Ford Mustang as Hottest Car. There were many other examples of each.

While products are available for every make and model, exhibitors are investing more in these four—as platforms for the customization, adaptation and accessorization that are SEMA's hallmarks—than in any other vehicles, a sign that consumers can expect to find a wide variety of products for accessorizing them.

"The SEMA Award amplifies the industry's special ability to identify and set trends that consumers follow," added Kersting.

the media," said Ken Czubay, Ford's vice president for marketing, sales and service. "It's the influencers, and it provides a tremendous opportunity to get feedback from people who use our products."

And, he might have added, people who influence others to buy those products.

And it's not just new car sales that the influencers influence, said Gilles, "It helps stimulate even used car sales.

"A lot of hand-me-downs have become someone else's dream car."

Gilles said the automakers also come to SEMA to identify trends in customization and personalization—for example wheel finishes, of which he said there are seven available for the new SRT Viper. After seeing them growing in appeal at SEMA, Ford now offers black wheels as an option on its Mustang.

Gilles said that after his official duties were finished at the show, he was staying an extra day just to wander around, to see what's new and what's hot and to keep his pulse on car culture beyond Woodward Avenue.

Ford's Jamie Allison noted that as soon as cars were invented and went into mass production more than 100 years ago, "two things happened immediately," he said, "people took them to the limit in terms of performance and people personalized them." ■

