

Auto show looking more like CES than not

January 21 2009, By Mike Wendland

As I toured the convention hall this past week, I had to keep reminding myself that this was Detroit and the North American International Auto Show, not Las Vegas and the Consumer Electronics Show.

For amidst all the high-end tech in the hybrids and electronic vehicles on display are vehicles that are showing off impressive touch screens, in-dash avatars and computerized infotainment systems with onboard, online connectivity that rivals that of a broadband-wired desktop PC.

In fact, at least one of those new tech advances was first announced at CES.

Ford Motor Co. chose Las Vegas and the just-ended technology show to introduce its latest version of Sync, the voice-activated mobile phone and digital entertainment system it developed in partnership with Microsoft. The new Sync 3.0 adds real-time traffic and turn-by-turn navigation as well as customized news, sports and weather reports.

Sync's OK, but the Ford tech feature that most impressed me was something called Automatic Park Assist. It's an option, still unpriced, that will be available on the 2010 Lincoln MKS sedan and new Lincoln MKT crossover.

It uses an ultrasonic-based sensing system to alert you when you pass a parking space that the sensors determine the vehicle can fit into and then, once you put the car in reverse and remove your hands from the wheel, it actually parks the car for you.

Hands free. Automatically. Within 6 inches of the curb. Perfect parallel parking.

I got to try it out. You can see the video of my demo on my blog at freep.com/wendland.

Ford also has a nifty new high-tech key that parents of young drivers will appreciate. It's called MyKey and will debut in the 2010 Focus Coupe and then across the entire line of other Ford, Lincoln and Mercury models.

Parents can program the device so it limits the vehicle's top speed at 80 mph, won't let the radio play if seat belts aren't fastened and sounds warning chimes at 45, 55 and 65 mph.

Perhaps the biggest wow-factor tech trend at the show can be seen on the concept vehicles: Touch screens and dashboard computers.

Chrysler's 200C EV concept car has an electronic instrument panel that consists of a large screen all controlled by touch, like the iPhone.

You can move electronic gauges around, customize the look just like you do with your computer desktop and control lighting, colors, entertainment and environmental functions.

The 200C's front-seat passenger has access to a touch-screen computer and infotainment system that accesses the Internet, controls an onboard hard drive filled with digital media and can send directions to the driver.

It even can be programmed to turn on the lights at home, power up appliances, adjust temperature settings and lock home windows and doors remotely.

The electric Cadillac Converj concept car also has a very high-tech dash. It offers a reconfigurable, or customizable, instrument cluster with touch-screen navigation.

The Converj has no rearview or outside mirrors. Instead, cameras provide surrounding panoramic images high on a recessed screen built into the instrument panel.

That's cool. But the coolest techno dash has to be on the Lincoln C concept.

Think the TV show "Knight Rider." Instead of KITT, meet EVA, an on-screen female avatar that talks to you, responding conversationally, calling you by name.

Ask EVA to find a Web page or news story online and she does, reading it back to you. Same with your e-mail. She goes online, telling you the inbox contents and then reading whatever message you want. Want to see your friends' latest Facebook updates? EVA will clue you in.

Lincoln claims EVA even "senses your mood" and if heavy traffic has you all tense and frazzled, she will find soothing music on your Sync music library and play it for you at just the right volume.

Nobody I could find from Lincoln knew what, if anything, EVA stands for. So until I hear otherwise, I'm thinking it must be something like Eerie Vehicle Avatar.

EVA's high-tech cool, but spooky.

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