

Ford Fusion Hybrid wins 2010 car of year award

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In this Nov. 17, 2008 file photo, the 2010 Ford Fusion Hybrid is seen at the Ford Product Design Center in Dearborn, Mich. The Ford Fusion Hybrid midsize sedan wins the 2010 North American Car of the Year Monday, Jan. 11, 2010, while the Ford Transit Connect takes truck of the year at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit.(AP Photo/Carlos Osorio, File)

(AP) -- Ford Motor Co.'s market momentum got a lift Monday by winning both the 2010 North American Car and Truck of the Year awards.

Ford's Fusion Hybrid midsize sedan took top car honors and its versatile Transit Connect compact van snagged truck of the year at the Detroit auto show.

It was only the third time in 17 years that an automaker has won both

awards, selected by 49 auto journalists and given annually since 1994. Finalists for the car award included the Buick LaCrosse and Volkswagen Golf GTI and TDI diesel. The Chevrolet Equinox, Ford Transit Connect and Subaru Outback were finalists for the truck award.

"It's such a huge motivator for our team," Mark Fields, Ford's president of the Americas, told reporters after the announcements on the first day of media previews for the show. "It's a reaffirmation of all the hard work over the past couple of years."

The awards, given annually by journalists who test cars throughout the year, are often used by automakers in advertising. Vehicles are judged on innovation, design, safety, handling, driver satisfaction and value.

Ford, the only U.S.-based automaker to avoid [bankruptcy protection](#), has fared better than its two Detroit rivals, with overall sales down 15 percent last year compared with a 36 percent drop for Chrysler and a 30 percent decline for GM.

Ford's final month of 2009 was strong, with a 33 percent increase in sales thanks to strong demand for midsize cars. Last year, it gained U.S. market share for the first time since 1995, helped by critical raves for its fuel-efficient cars, like the midsize Fusion. Its compact Focus and popular Escape crossover also boosted sales.

"We still have a long way to go ... getting the business back to healthy profitability," Fields said. "We have to channel that good feeling into our efforts for 2010."

To be considered for the car and truck of the year honors, vehicles must be new or substantially changed from the previous model.

Last year's winners were the Hyundai Genesis luxury sedan and the Ford

F-150 pickup. The Transit Connect, a small, European van, is the sixth Ford truck to win the award. Fields said the automaker thinks of it as a "white space vehicle" - one unlike anything else on the road.

"When you see this on the road, your first reaction is, 'What is that?'" he said. "The second reaction for a lot of customers, particularly small fleets and small business owners is, 'Hey, I want to get into that and check it out.'"

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