

Carmakers lure youth with gadgets, sleek design

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Dashboards glittering with gadgets, turbo-charged engines and sleek designs are on offer as automakers try to attract young consumers who care more about computers than cars.

BMW's Mini is the most tricked-out car on display at the Detroit auto show this week -- offering drivers a way to turn their car into both a video game and a DJ, using a joystick to help navigate the chrome circular display.

The Mini's dynamic music system shifts sound levels of different speakers and adds tracks when the car accelerates, brakes or turns.

The car also turns [fuel efficiency](#) into a game using a fish bowl graphic that tips over if a driver wastes fuel by accelerating or braking too quickly.

And the on-board computer is programmed to speak 1,800 different messages, including "yippee, that was awesome!" for a smooth turn and "it's cold outside."

Volkswagen's new Beetle features a Fender sound system that can be turned into an amplifier thanks to a jack for an electric guitar.

Hyundai's navigation system lets parents track how fast their teenagers drive and where they take the car -- which might sound a bit creepy and restrictive, but could make it easier to trust kids with the keys.

[Voice recognition](#), Bluetooth connections, [navigation systems](#) that track the location of [Facebook friends](#), and access to internet radio stations, restaurant reviews, and search engines are also becoming standard fare as [automakers](#) seek to keep up with a generation raised in the digital age.

Car sales among the under-30 crowd have been sluggish in recent years and -- perhaps more worryingly -- US teenagers are no longer rushing to get a driver's license the instant they're old enough for the traditional rite of passage.

"The big thing about the youth market is, do they care about cars at all," Jeremy Anwyl, president of automotive site Edmunds.com, told AFP.

"Nobody really has an answer because a lot of the data was collected in a recession -- if you can't afford something you don't give it a lot of thought."

The 80 million strong under-30 crowd represents 40 percent of potential US car buyers and have a collective spending power and influence of nearly a trillion dollars.

"It would be a misstep to paint youth with a broad brush," said Bob Carter, of Toyota Motor Sales USA.

While some young people are still attracted to muscle cars and performance, others are looking for environmentally-friendly options. Some want a hatchback or sport utility vehicle so they can haul bikes, surfboards or friends, while others are looking for zippy little cars with an urban feel.

"The common thread through all that is (that) we do pack those vehicles with a high level of content, specifically on technology," Carter said in an interview on the sidelines of the Detroit auto show.

"But we have to do it in a responsible way that's not distracting."

Toyota has developed an entire brand -- Scion -- to lure young people looking for something more stylish than what their parents drive.

Personalization and performance has been a big part of Scion's appeal -- it offers a wider range of colors and interiors, spoilers and appliques, encouraging a robust after-market upgrade industry.

Carmakers are also expecting the 'millennials' to be more interested in luxury brands once they settle into their careers, and are expanding their offerings of entry-level luxury vehicles, said Mark Templin, general manager of Toyota's luxury Lexus brand.

"We talk a lot about the democratization of luxury," he said on the sidelines of the show.

"It's a generation that grew up in affluence. Young people are attracted to buying luxury... whether it's kitchen appliances or clothing or it's handbags or cars, they want premium goods."

But the ongoing recession also has young people looking for value, said Mark Reuss, president of the North American division of General Motors.

That's why GM is expanding its small car offerings like the Chevy Cruz, Sonic and Spark and designing them to "look confident, expensive and fast."

"Who really knows if it's possible to make young people fall in love with an automotive brand the way they do with a phone or a laptop or a social network?" Reuss said.

"All I can tell you is, if there's a way to do it, Chevrolet is going to find it."

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