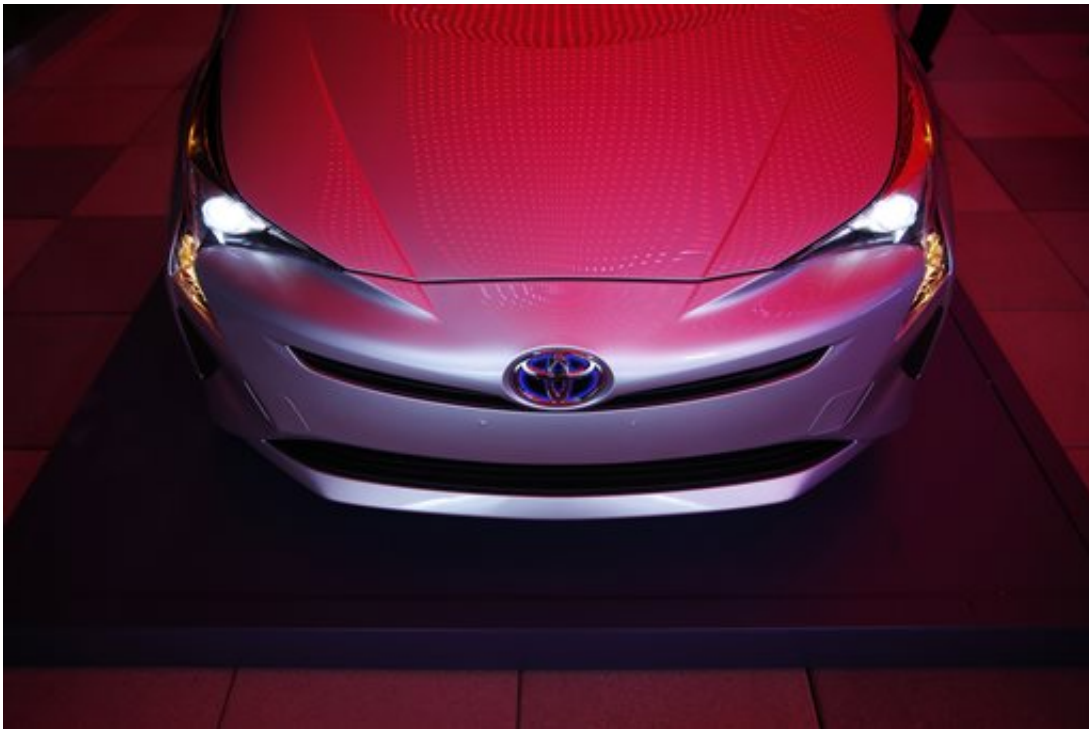


# Fun not fuel-saving focus in Las Vegas debut of Toyota Prius

September 9 2015, by Kimberly Pierceall And Tom Krisher

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Toyota unveils the latest version of the Prius at an event Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2015, in Las Vegas. The car is still the No. 1 hybrid on the market but has been a tougher sell for dealers with gas prices below \$3 in many areas of the country. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Where does a practical car like the Toyota Prius go to reinvent itself? The same place many people go to let loose and have fun: Las Vegas.

Brightly-lit displays on a Las Vegas Strip rooftop-turned-nightclub reminded the gathered crowd of executives, car dealers and automotive journalists on Tuesday night that the Prius could be modern, sleek and edgy.

"We've got the whole package now," said Bill Fay, general manager of the Toyota Division in the United States. "People will want to buy this car for more than just the fuel efficiency."

The rollout of Toyota's new gas-electric hybrid Prius comes at an inauspicious time for fuel-sipping vehicles. Gas prices nationwide were at \$2.38 per gallon Wednesday, the lowest level at this time of year in since 2004, and analysts expect more declines now that summer driving season has ended. South Carolina prices are under \$2 per gallon according to AAA, and three other states were at \$2.09 or lower.

The Japanese automaker hasn't abandoned fuel-efficiency but at Tuesday night's event atop a rooftop at the Linq casino-hotel, the emphasis was squarely on fun complete with a hip band-of-the-moment as the car's opening act and Kobe beef sliders, crab legs and creme brûlée as an appetizer before the company hoisted a hyper sonic red Prius about 60 feet into the air for all to see.

"Now we have a car that's not just for mom and dad, tree-huggers and people on a budget," said David Rodgers, vice president of two Toyota dealerships in northern California. "This is what America's been waiting for: a hybrid car with edge," he said. Something the kids will want to drive, he said.



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The 2016 Prius is more sculpted and sportier looking than the current version as Toyota tries to move the car from appealing mainly to environmentalists to more of a mainstream vehicle. The company says it will get about 55 mpg in combined city and highway driving, about 10 percent better than the 2015 version. It's more than 2 inches longer than the current car, and it sits almost an inch lower. The fourth-generation Prius' new underpinnings, including a new suspension, will give it a lower center of gravity for crisper handling than the current Prius, plus a smoother ride.

Details about its speed were not divulged.



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Tom Libby, manager of industry analysis for the IHS Automotive consulting firm, said the Prius brand name is so familiar now that the car no longer has to look different for the environmentally conscious to make a statement that they're driving a hybrid. The new styling, he said, will help it appeal to more people.

The launch timing is unfortunate for Toyota, which had been planning the new Prius for several years and didn't know that gas prices would be so low at this time, Libby said. "At some point gas prices will go up and fuel economy will rise on people's priority lists, and they'll be right there with that product," he said.

U.S. Prius sales peaked at nearly 237,000 in 2012 with the introduction of wagon and compact models. Gasoline averaged \$3.63 per gallon that year, the most expensive year on record. But since then, Prius sales have fallen to just over 207,000 last year. Through August sales are down 17 percent from a year earlier and Fay said he expects sales to fall below 200,000 by the year's end.



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Sales of hybrid and electric cars generally fall when gasoline prices are low, but the drop during the past two years has been amplified by a global shift to small and large SUVs.

Gas-powered SUVs have become more efficient, with many smaller ones getting more than 30 miles per gallon on the highway. Buyers like the high seating position and gear-hauling capability of the SUVs, which range in size from the small Honda HR-V to larger vehicles like the Chevrolet Suburban.

The Prius, first introduced in the U.S. in 2000, will have the best fuel economy for vehicles that aren't plugged in for recharging, the company said. An Eco model, to be introduced later, will get even better mileage.



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Toyota also upgraded the interior. It also gets a more rigid structure to

protect people in a crash, and it will offer a safety package that features pedestrian detection and automatic, pre-collision braking.

The new Prius arrives in dealerships early next year. The price wasn't announced, but the current version starts at \$24,200 excluding shipping.



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