

With SUV look, tech touches, Chrysler aims to revive minivan

January 11 2016, byDee-Ann Durbin



The 2017 Chrysler Pacifica is unveiled at the North American International Auto Show, Monday, Jan. 11, 2016, in Detroit, Mich. (AP Photo/Tony Ding)

Thirty-three years ago, Chrysler invented the minivan. Now, it's reinventing it—with styling reminiscent of an SUV, high-tech features and a first-ever hybrid version that Chrysler hopes will make minivans popular again.

The 2017 Chrysler Pacifica was unveiled Monday morning at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit.

It's the latest incarnation of the family hauler that took the suburbs by storm. Lee Iacocca, Chrysler Corp.'s former chairman, drove the company's first minivan off the assembly line in 1983. Baby Boomers loved its sliding doors and roomy interior, and the minivan quickly replaced station wagons as the vehicle of choice for shuttling around kids. By the early 1990s, Chrysler was selling more than 500,000 per year. U.S. minivan sales peaked at 1.37 million in 2000.

But minivans took a hit when car companies started making crossovers—small SUVs that had as much space as minivans but handled more like cars and had better fuel economy. Minivans suddenly looked clunky and undesirable. General Motors and Ford stopped making them altogether. Last year, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles—Chrysler's current owner—sold less than 200,000 minivans in the U.S.

FCA aims to reverse that slide with the Pacifica, which goes on sale this spring. It replaces both the Chrysler Town and Country and Dodge Grand Caravan, although FCA's car chief Tim Kuniskis says the company will keep making the current model of the Grand Caravan for as long as there is buyer demand. Sales of the Grand Caravan fell 28 percent last year.



The 2017 Chrysler Pacifica Hybrid minivan is unveiled at the North American International Auto Show, Monday, Jan. 11, 2016, in Detroit. Chrysler claims this hybrid model will do 80 miles per gallon. (AP Photo/Tony Ding)

There's hardly anything the company didn't change with the Pacifica—members of some focus groups didn't realize it was a minivan, the company says. Kuniskis says a vehicle so different deserved a new name; the company settled on "Pacifica," the name of a small SUV Chrysler sold a decade ago.

The Pacifica has a sleeker, swept-back look than the current boxy models, which were last redesigned in 2008. It sits lower to the ground and has bigger wheels, giving it a more substantial feel. It looks more luxurious, with bright chrome strips outlining the windows and LED-accented headlights and taillights.

But FCA knows looks alone aren't enough to fend off rivals like the Honda Odyssey and the Toyota Sienna, which have been eating away at

Chrysler's market share for years.



This Friday, Jan. 8, 2016, photo, shows the interior of the 2017 Chrysler Pacifica, in Auburn Hills, Mich. In 1983, Chrysler invented the minivan. Now, it's reinventing it, and hoping sexier styling, high-tech features and a first-ever hybrid version will make minivans cool again. The 2017 Chrysler Pacifica will be unveiled Monday, Jan. 11 at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit. (AP Photo/Paul Sancya)

So it's debuting several segment firsts. The Pacifica will be the only minivan with a plug-in hybrid version. The hybrid will go up to 30 miles on electric power alone before its gas engine kicks in, thanks to a lithium-ion battery tucked under the second-row seats. Gas-powered models have a 3.6-liter V-6 engine with 287 horsepower. Chrysler promises the new minivan, 200 pounds lighter than its predecessors, will have the best fuel economy in the segment.

And Chrysler is changing the minivan's hallmark feature, the sliding doors: They'll be aluminum and hands-free, opening automatically if the driver waves a foot under them. The vehicle also can automatically perform parallel and perpendicular parking, and the rear-seat entertainment system has two ten-inch touchscreens that let passengers play games, watch movies or surf the Internet.

There is no all-wheel-drive version for now. Kuniskis said all-wheel-drive sales make up a tiny percentage of the minivan market, so FCA didn't think there was enough demand.



John Elkann, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles Chairman, center left, sits with FCA CEO Sergio Marchionne, center right, before a Chrysler news conference at the North American International Auto Show, Monday, Jan. 11, 2016, in Detroit. (AP Photo/Tony Ding)

Pricing hasn't been announced. The current Chrysler Town and Country—the fancier of the company's models—starts at \$30,000.

The minivan will be made in Windsor, Ontario. Kuniskis said a few will be sold overseas, but 95 percent will be sold in North America.

Kelley Blue Book analyst Mark Williams says minivans face an uphill battle. This fall, small SUVs became the biggest segment of the U.S. new-vehicle market, at 14 percent. Small vans make up only about 3 percent of that market, according to Ward's AutoInfoBank.



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Still, Williams thinks the Pacifica is a minivan the owner can be proud to drive.

And there's one more selling point for parents: The rear touchscreens have an animated map mode that can show a child how far the minivan is from its destination.

That's right, no more asking, "Are we there yet?"



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Citation: With SUV look, tech touches, Chrysler aims to revive minivan (2016, January 11)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-suv-tech-chrysler-aims-revive.html>

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