

Ford CEO looks to autonomous cars, sharing economy

February 22 2016, by Joseph Wilson



Ford CEO Mark Fields talks during an interview next to the new Kuga SUV car, which features its latest connectivity and driver-assisted technology, during the Mobile World Congress Wireless show, the world's largest mobile phone trade show, in Barcelona, Spain, Monday, Feb. 22, 2016. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)

Ford CEO Mark Fields says the 112-year-old company is tripling its investment in new technologies that will ultimately lead to self-driving vehicles—but will keep making cars for drivers who want to keep their

hands on the wheel.

Fields said it was no coincidence that Ford chose the Mobile World Congress, a massive technology trade show in Barcelona, to unveil its new Kuga SUV, which features its latest connectivity and driver-assisted technology.

"We are really emphasizing our transition from an auto company to an auto and mobility company," Fields told The Associated Press in an interview Monday at Ford's stand, which stood out in a sea of smartphone and gadget makers.

"This is a really good audience to reach some new folks."

The Kuga includes the latest version of Ford's connectivity technology, SYNC 3, which the company says includes improved voice commands and makes it easier to access applications on a driver's smartphone. It has a new 1.5-liter diesel engine, among other features.

Fields said that over the next five years investment will increase threefold in autonomous driving technologies, such as one-button parking assistance and guidance to keep a car in its lane and help braking in heavy traffic, with the ultimate goal of a fully autonomous car. He declined to provide financial figures.



A Ford worker talks to a visitor about the new Ford Kuga SUV features in connectivity and driver-assisted technology during the Mobile World Congress Wireless show, the world's largest mobile phone trade show, in Barcelona, Spain, Monday, Feb. 22, 2016. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)

Don Butler, Ford's executive director of connected vehicle and services, told the AP "we like to think about it as the transition from just a hardware company to a software and mobility services company as well."

"Mobility" is a buzzword at the wireless show. For Ford customers, it means a wide range of innovations from further integration of the Internet in cars, to ride-sharing and even the use of other modes of transport in conjunction with cars, like bicycles.

Fields said Ford is aware it will have to be careful to keep a hold on the

traditional car driver, by protecting—especially in the United States—the aura of personal freedom that automakers have always cast over their products.



A man takes photographs with a phone inside the new Ford Kuga SUV car, which features its latest connectivity and driver-assisted technology, during the Mobile World Congress Wireless show, the world's largest mobile phone trade show, in Barcelona, Spain, Monday, Feb. 22, 2016. (AP Photo/Francisco Seco)

Ford is taking a "dual path" in developing the connected car, said Fields. One for those who want to be assisted by the car or eventually have the vehicle take over, and another for drivers who want to keep control of the wheel.

With ride-sharing platforms like Uber reshaping driving for many young

would-be consumers, Ford is also looking to get a piece of the so-called sharing economy.

"Across the world when you see growth of these megacities, with 10 million or more folks, people want mobility solutions, they want options," Fields said. That can include car-sharing, ride-sharing or the use of multiple modes of transportation linked into one service—such as the use of a train and bike.



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He said Ford is testing some programs in this field, which he sees as "a

big revenue opportunity."

Those projects include car-sharing in London and across Germany. Ford is also working on an experimental e-bikes program that Butler said it could one day mesh with car-sharing.

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