

Honda unveils new Odyssey in small, scrappy minivan market

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American Honda Executive Vice President John Mendel speaks about the new Honda Odyssey minivan at the North American International Auto Show, Monday, Jan. 9, 2017, in Detroit. (AP Photo/Tony Ding)

A veteran player in the small but scrappy minivan segment is getting a major upgrade.

Honda unveiled a sleeker 2018 Odyssey Monday at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit featuring a range of design and

technology updates.

No proper reboot of the family hauler comes without seating innovations. Honda calls its flexible second-row advancements "Magic Slide," and promises seats that can easily reconfigure, whether moving forward, together or apart from other seats and rows.

Getting equal billing are some technology upgrades that are new to Honda but desired by drivers and akin to what's being seen in more mainstream vehicles. A system called Cabin Watch allows the driver and front passenger to monitor backseat passengers via display audio screen. Cabin Talk is a high-tech intercom that enables the driver to talk to passengers through second- and third-row speakers and rear-entertainment system headphones.

There's also a passel of driver-assist technologies that are new to the Odyssey, including those that help keep motorists in their lanes and on the road, avoid collisions and automatically adjust cruise control.



The new Honda Odyssey minivan is unveiled at the North American

International Auto Show, Monday, Jan. 9, 2017, in Detroit. (AP Photo/Tony Ding)

The Odyssey's relaunch follows last year's debut of the Chrysler Pacifica, which sold about 62,000 vehicles in the United States after going on sale in April—and won a new award for utility vehicle of the year at the show Monday.

For all of 2016, the Odyssey sold nearly 121,000, trailing the Toyota Sienna and Dodge Caravan—which were both shy of 128,000. The Odyssey had its last complete redesign in 2011.

Minivans represent about 3 percent of the U.S. new-vehicle market, which lately has been dominated by small SUVs. Several automakers have abandoned the minivan segment after its late 20th century heyday, but not everyone is writing it off, according to Matt DeLorenzo, a managing editor for Kelley Blue Book.

"I don't see the minivan as a dead-end segment. It is a significant segment and it's going to get more interesting as new models roll into the marketplace," he said. "Even though ... there's only a few players in there, they're not sitting back saying, 'We'll get our share.' They're really going at it hammer and tongs—spending money and upgrading."



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Still, DeLorenzo said he doesn't think Honda was under pressure "to really push the envelope that much," for the aging Odyssey. Rather, he said, the automaker needed to "take a really good vehicle and improve it" with things like seat and semi-autonomous innovations in an appropriately contemporary package.

The new Odyssey goes on sale in the spring. Pricing hasn't been announced, but the current model starts at about \$30,000. Fuel economy ratings also haven't been released, but the vehicle is nearly 100 pounds lighter than its predecessor. It's going to be equipped with a 3.5-liter V-6 engine and one of two transmissions: a 9-speed or 10-speed automatic—the latter, Honda says, is a performance-boosting first for a minivan.

Honda has sold 2.5 million Odysseys in the U.S. since its debut in 1994. The new version is the second generation to be designed and developed in North America and is made at the automaker's plant in Lincoln, Alabama.

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