

Signs of Life in Detroit (or at least Dearborn)

Ford has emerged as the U.S. car company on the firmest financial footing, and now it's shoring up its showroom fleet.

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HE MACHINATIONS of CEO Alan Mulally over the past two and a half years have given Ford a stronger balance sheet than the other two domestic automakers—Ford alone said it didn't need an emergency loan from the U.S. government—but the company's relative financial health hasn't been reflected in its rolling stock. Now, a series of recent new-car introductions have us impressed, and optimistic, about Ford's future. The first, in December, was for the 2010 Fusion [see page 42]. Ford took the opportunity of a midcycle update—usually an occasion for little more than

a new fascia and some mild primping—to give its mid-size sedan, already earning kudos for its reliability, a surprisingly thorough makeover, topped by the addition of a very accomplished hybrid model that sets a new benchmark for fuel economy among family sedans and is also a pleasure to drive. Next came three Detroit auto show reveals. The Shelby GT500 version of Ford's restyled 2010 pony car should help keep the fire burning for the Mustang faithful. Less exciting, perhaps, but far more impressive is the Lincoln MKT. It's a platform mate to the Ford Flex, but it looks absolutely unrelated to that

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The 2010 Taurus leads Ford's new product offensive.



MARCH 2009

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AVERAGE NUMBER OF FORD TAURUSES SOLD EACH CALENDAR YEAR DURING THE MODEL'S FIRST TWO DECADES ON THE MARKET.

cool cube. We're still divided on its face (seen also on the MKS sedan), but its sleek, flowing bod is the sexiest in crossover land. Frankly, though, the biggest shocker to come out of Dearborn this winter is the 2010 Taurus. We'd long since given up hope that Ford's mainstream sedan would recapture the ability to dazzle the way the first Taurus did—but this one does, inside and out. As taxpayers, we're glad Ford didn't hit us up for a loan, but as car geeks, we're way more excited about what we're seeing on four wheels. After all, you can't drive a balance sheet.

—JOE LORIO

2010 Ford Taurus

The new Taurus is nobody's dog-tired rental car. Instead, it's "the flagship for the Ford Motor Company," boasts car design director Moray Callum. "We wanted to produce a purely American car." And they have. The new Taurus, on sale this summer, has style and substance in spades and wears its blue-oval badge large and proud in its broad, three-bar grille. Unlike its predecessors, the Taurus is not explicitly a family car, since Ford believes that today's families prefer crossovers. Sure, there are five seatbelts, but the driver's environment has a sporty-cockpit feel, with Mustang-style dual binnacles, nicely bolstered seats, paddle shifters, blue-lit instruments, and a T-shaped gearshifter, also from the Mustang. Much of the interior reflects a new way of thinking for Ford, such as the fact that the center stack slopes at a sharp, 38-degree angle. "The engineers originally didn't want us to break the 30-degree barrier," recalls interior designer Lon Zaback, "but [executive vice president] Mark Fields wanted it, and it gave us the flow-through and allowed us to raise the center console height."

The Taurus is similar in size and proportion to the Lincoln MKS, with which it shares its Volvo-derived "D3" platform, but it has a lower roofline and shorter overhangs. Development took two and a half years, and chief engineer Pete Reyes claims that its first focus was "on handling and steering, for a very engaging feel. We spent a lot of time calibrating the SelectShift to make the paddleshifting very quick. We also targeted quietness, with lots of sound deadening." Powertrains will mirror those of the Flex: a 3.5-liter V-6 will send some 256 hp to the front wheels or to all four with optional all-wheel drive, and the direct-injected, 350-hp turbocharged EcoBoost V-6 will also be available. Although Ford is largely mum on the subject, it's clear that an SVT version—inevitably to get the storied SHO moniker—is in the works.

—JOE DEMATTO





2010 Lincoln MKT

"The MKT is fully differentiated from the Flex," claims chief engineer Ron Heiser. That's a bit of hyperbole, since they share the same platform (one which Heiser points out has superb crash performance) and basic chassis tuning. But his point is well-taken, because everything you see and touch both inside and outside the MKT—which closely hews to the MKT Concept from last year's Detroit show—has little to nothing in common with the Flex. Indeed, chief designer Gordon Platto takes visible pleasure from pointing out the MKT's features: "This is the first time we've actually fully integrated the grille from the [2007] MKR Concept. We've combined it with zero-offset bumpers for a smooth exterior. Inside, we use the same cut-and-sew leather and wood trim as in the MKS sedan, and our 'floating armrest' is also from the MKR and allows us to offer contrast-color inserts later."



■ The bustleback MKT changed little from the MKT Concept. The rear styling brings to mind prewar limousines, while the strong shoulder lines are meant to evoke 1970s Lincolns.

When it goes on sale late this summer, the Ontario-built, glass-roofed, seven-passenger crossover will be offered in front- or all-wheel-drive guise, powered by a 267-hp, 268-lb-ft, 3.7-liter V-6 mated to a six-speed paddleshift transmission. The optional EcoBoost V-6 bumps both power and torque to about 350 and comes with standard all-wheel drive and its own 20-inch wheel design (twenties are also available with the base V-6). Thus equipped, the MKT tips the scales at a whopping 5250 pounds, but Heiser points out weight-saving measures, such as a "huge piece" of magnesium in the tailgate that saved twenty pounds and the use of cast magnesium for the superstructure that holds the radiator. Pricing hasn't been announced, but Lincoln says the \$41,750 Acura MDX and the \$44,325 Audi Q7 are its primary targets. — JD



FORD SHELBY GT500

- 2010 model; on sale this spring
- Carroll Shelby served as active advisor
- Coupe and convertible return
- Extensively retuned chassis for better ride, steering, and body control; four-piston Brembo front brakes
- Supercharged V-8 makes 540 hp and 510 lb-ft, the same as the mighty KR
- Hood aperture extracts hot air from the engine bay
- 18-inch wheels on the convertible; 19-inchers standard on the coupe
- Coupe curb weight increases only about 10 pounds, to 3930 pounds
- Cobra grille badge moves to the passenger's side due to a new snorkel for cold-air intake on the driver's side
- Real aluminum, Alcantara interior trim