

Automotive News

2012 DETROIT AUTO SHOW

Chevy's latest concepts -- crafted by the kids

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Automotive News | January 9, 2012 - 9:30 am EST

UPDATED: 1/9/12 11:20 a.m. ET

DETROIT -- Look closely at the two Chevrolet concept coupes that General Motors is introducing at the auto show today: They offer clues to what young buyers want in a car.

At least that's the idea. General Motors spent about a year developing the coupes through feedback from hundreds of young people in trendsetting markets such as California and New York. The interactive design process was unprecedented for GM, going far beyond typical design clinics, says Clay Dean, GM's executive director of advanced global design.

Both are four-seat coupes, a model now represented in Chevy's lineup solely by the Camaro. Why coupes? It emerged as a popular choice of the so-called Millennials -- defined by GM as 11-to-30-year-olds -- with whom GM designers and product planners hung out.



GM President North America Mark Reuss unveils three new Chevrolets -- the Code 130R concept, left, the Sonic RS, middle, and the Tru 140S concept, right, on Monday at the North American International Auto Show.

Photo credit: GM

From chats to concepts

GM started broadly, with informal chats about how young people use technology, their life aspirations and their impressions of consumer brands. Later, GM returned to the same groups for their thoughts on exterior and interior

designs and vehicle features.

What emerged are two C-segment cars -- think Chevy Cruze size -- that GM envisions pricing between \$19,000 and \$24,000. Both have the same 1.4-liter turbocharged engine used in the Chevy Sonic. Both would get at least 40 mpg in highway driving, Dean said.

- **Code 130R:** A rear-wheel-drive coupe whose design is inspired by Chevy's performance heritage, with fender flares and an aggressive front fascia. Dean calls it "functional muscle." It's not a muscle car, but sports a "very authentic, straightforward" design, he says. The engine delivers 150 hp. GM envisions pairing it with GM's eAssist mild hybrid technology, which improves fuel economy from 12 to 20 percent, depending on the vehicle's size and other factors. The coupe is about 8 inches shorter than a Cruze but about the same width. It sports 20-inch matte gold wheels.

- **Tru 140S:** Chevy calls the front-wheel-drive, three-door hatchback "affordable exotic." It's sleek and sporty, "designed to look confident, exotic, expensive and fast," a Chevrolet press release says. It sports a new matte-white paint and Chevy's 21-inch performance chrome wheels. The car shares a platform with the Cruze and Chevy Volt plug-in hybrid. Chevy added technologies typically found on higher-end vehicles, such as direct injection and a stop-start system, which shuts off the engine at a complete stop and restarts it when the driver's foot leaves the brake pedal.

'Thinking out loud'

GM could decide to build both cars -- or neither. Dean says each is a work in progress. GM hopes to shape them further as it displays them this year at about 15 events -- such as auto shows and music festivals -- across the country.

"If a coupe emerges, fantastic. If a crossover emerges, wonderful," Dean said. "We're thinking out loud here."

GM believes the deep-dive on the Millennial generation could give it a competitive advantage on a huge segment. GM says there are 80 million American consumers "approaching 30" years old, representing 40 percent of the potential car-buying public.

"We don't think any brands today quite get this group," said John McFarland, senior manager of global strategic marketing at GM.

He said Chevrolet product planners and marketers are engaging young people "at every level across the brand, and injecting their feedback into the process. We're now taking this engagement to the next level" to help craft the concepts.

Dean says the ongoing dialogue with Millennials has helped dispel some myths, regardless of whether either concept reaches production.

Timeless, not zany

Small sports cars didn't rise to the top, as conventional wisdom might suggest. Instead, the young people told GM that they want slightly bigger cars with enough room to cart around their friends. Many of the young people GM worked with described mid-sized cars such as the Honda Accord or Nissan Altima as "small."

"We think they're looking for the hottest, newest, coolest thing -- bright colors, crazy designs, expressiveness," said Dean, who has five children ages 12 to 20. But that conventional wisdom isn't accurate.

"A lot of these kids who we talked to, these are pretty mainstream kids," he said. "They were looking for things that are timeless. They weren't looking for the zaniest things."

And there was one pleasant finding: Young kids still love cars, contrary to an emerging theory that passion for automobiles is for past generations.

"What we found was really the exact opposite. The love of the automobile is still there," said Dean, whose first car was a 1969 Chevelle that he bought for \$1,300.

"As much as these kids are connected and as fast as their life is moving," he says, "the car for them is still an escape."



Chevy's Tru 140S is left; and the Code 130R is right.

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