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Ford aims to capture more ground with new Fusion

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DETROIT -- The Ford Fusion has grown steadily more popular during six full years on the U.S. market. With the redesigned 2013 model shown here today, Ford Motor Co. says it's now ready to take on the top-sellers in the heated mid-sized sedan market.

The new Fusion's sweeping and sculptural styling is aimed at luring customers from the play-it-safe designs of perennial segment leaders Toyota Camry and Honda Accord.

And as the first sedan to come in gasoline, gasoline-electric hybrid and plug-in hybrid variations, Ford will attempt to lure buyers who want more space than they can find in the Chevrolet Volt or Toyota Prius.

The design goal for the new car was to provide "a top-drawer visual experience, adding some emotional appeal to an already sensible choice," said Chris Hamilton, the car's chief of exterior design.

The 2013 Fusion is scheduled to go on sale in the United States in the second half of the year. Prices have not been announced. It will be sold as the Mondeo in Europe.

The Camry and Accord faltered in 2011, in part because of earthquake-related supply constraints. Now Ford sees an opening for further gains in the crucial segment.

U.S. sales of the Fusion rose 13 percent last year to 248,067 -- a third straight year of double-digit increases. Sales rose in every year since the car's 2005 debut except for a 1 percent decline 2008 as the industry headed toward collapse.

Mark Fields, Ford's president of the Americas, says the 2013 Fusion gives Ford an opportunity to "grow this part of our business."

Mid-sized cars represented nearly 52 percent of the U.S. passenger car market last year. The segment is becoming far more competitive.

Volkswagen's all-new Passat sedan has gained ground since its arrival last year, and Kia has made inroads with the redesigned Optima.

Ford will also square off with an all-new Chevrolet Malibu that will go on sale this quarter. The Accord, Mazda6, and Nissan Altima will also be redesigned for next fall, while the Camry was overhauled for the current model year.

The Fusion's design is based on Ford's Evos concept, which was shown in September at the Frankfurt auto show. The horizontal chrome bars that are a signature of the current Fusion have vanished.

Also gone is what designer Hamilton calls the "slab-sided look" of the current vehicle. Some journalists and analysts who saw the Fusion during a media preview said the car appeared to have taken cues from Aston Martin, an English sports luxury brand Ford once owned.

"To me it looks expensive," says David Sullivan, analyst for AutoPacific Inc. "It's for people who don't want the vanilla-flavored Camry. Fusion is not going to appeal to some people. I think Ford is OK with that."

Hamilton says Ford took feedback from customers all over the globe in designing the Fusion.

Customers in China thought the headlights on an earlier design looked "too sinister," he recalls. Ford modified the design. In years past Ford wouldn't have sold this car in markets such as China. But the world has gotten smaller, Hamilton says.

"The difference between the Chinese customer and the North American customer is not that much," he says.

In gasoline-engine versions, Ford will offer only four-cylinder powerplants. Gone will be the 3.0- and 3.5-liter V-6 engines offered in the 2012 Fusion.

At the top of the range will be Ford's 2.0-liter EcoBoost four-cylinder. Ford says the 2.0-liter will pump out 237 hp and get 25 percent better fuel economy than the outgoing 3.5-liter V-6. Ford did not discuss specific mpg numbers for the 2.0-liter engine.

Ford said the 1.6-liter engine, which it expects to be the volume leader, will get 26 mpg city/37 highway.

Ford is offering two hybrid powertrains: a gasoline-electric hybrid and a plug-in hybrid. The gasoline-electric hybrid will be available along with the gasoline models at launch next fall. Ford says the Fusion plug-in hybrid will be introduced later.

The Fusion Hybrid will get 47 mpg city/44 highway. The Fusion Energi, the plug-in hybrid, will hit the equivalent of 100 mpg, Ford predicts.

The 2013 Fusion also offers a number of technologies typically found only in luxury brands. Those include Ford's electronic Lane Keeping System, active park assist and adaptive cruise control.



Virtually everything will be new when the 2013 Fusion goes on sale in the United States in the second half of the year.

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