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Nissan bids to reclaim Pathfinder's 'glory'

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DETROIT -- Nissan North America will unveil a Pathfinder concept this week to tackle a glaring problem for the automaker: After 26 years of sales, the mid-sized Pathfinder is one of Nissan's best recognized nameplates.

But last year, U.S. deliveries of the SUV totaled just 25,935, up 21 percent from 2010.

Nissan hopes the redesigned Pathfinder that will reach showrooms this fall will take it back to the days when it sold upwards of 70,000 a year.

How? By moving it into the new heart of the SUV market, with a car-based chassis and a more fuel-efficient powertrain.

"We'd like to restore it to its glory," says Ken Kcomt, Nissan's director of product planning for trucks, SUVs and other vehicle lines. "Other products in this segment are selling around 100,000 a year."

The SUV market staged a comeback in 2011, with sales of the new Ford Explorer and redesigned Jeep Grand Cherokee reaching more than 125,000 units each.

Nissan is taking a similar approach used by Ford for the redesigned Explorer: preserving a well-established nameplate but putting it on a car-based platform.

Only the Pathfinder's new exterior is on display at this week's Detroit auto show. Nissan is not yet ready to give Detroit's international audience access to its reworked interior or powertrain.

But Kcomt says the long-serving SUV has been reshaped from the ground up.

It will now be built on Nissan's global D platform, a car architecture that also yields the Altima, Maxima and Quest minivan. The current Pathfinder is built on a truck frame architecture it shares with the Frontier pickup and Xterra SUV.

"The market is moving away from truck-based SUVs," Kcomt says. "Consumers still find the looks of an SUV alluring. They still want utility and they want the security of four-wheel-drive handling. But they also have other unmet needs that we are addressing."

On the D platform, with a smoother-driving continuously variable transmission, the SUV is nearly 500 pounds lighter than the previous version and roomier inside with three rows of flexible seating.

It will be 25 percent more fuel efficient than the current Pathfinder, although the company does not have official fuel economy figures. The two-wheel-drive version of the current model posts fuel economy of 15 mpg city/22 highway.

"Better fuel economy was important but it wasn't the only driver for us," Kcomt says. "Consumers are looking for something new in an SUV. They want interior roominess and comfort. They want something sleeker. In some

cases, they want something they feel is more socially responsible."

"That's why we're calling this Pathfinder the 'next generation' SUV."



Nissan is moving the next Pathfinder to the heart of the SUV market, with a car-based chassis and a more fuel-efficient powertrain.

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