

New brands on the block for today's consumer

BY NANCY SUNDSTROM

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It wasn't that long ago that owning a vehicle such as a Town Car, Park Avenue or Cavalier was a consummate sign of status. Today, there's a new batch of cars on the block, with names like Cobalt, Colorado, Freestar and Equinox that are capturing the fancy of buyers.

Familiar brand names are beginning to disappear in the

wake of exciting new models.

Where the mini-van once ruled as the top selling style of car, they've been edged out in recent years by sport utility vehicles (SUVs). There are 22 million SUVs on U.S. roads right now, about 10 percent of the total number of vehicles. Pickup trucks are also extremely popular, placing vehicles like the Silverado and Sierra and Dodge Ram right up alongside the Ford Explorer SUV in

top 10 seller lists.

Jamie Marsh of Bill Marsh Chrysler-Plymouth-Dodge and Bill Marsh Price Point Used Car Center of Traverse City said that there has been a shift in buying trends, not only in the U.S., but in the northern Michigan marketplace.

"It used to be the big three, GM Chrysler and Ford — and they're all still dominant — but there's been an explosion of new and different options in

the recent years that have blown things wide open, especially for the consumer," said Marsh.

"Locally, this is not a heavy import market as it might be in cities on the East or West Coast, but a few years back, we began picking up new lines, such as Hyundai, because they offer nice products and warranties at an attractive price, it fits a niche for us, and customers were interested in them. In gen-

eral, there's a lot more choices which makes it all more competitive, but, again, good for the consumer."

Marsh believes that the overall reputation of a vehicle continues to be important, and that if people have had good luck with a brand name in the past, they usually want to look at something from the same maker, if not the same model.

Marketing and advertising influence consumer choices and more buyers come in to dealerships having done their homework, said Marsh.

"But the trends have been changing and the crossover vehicles that are a combination of an SUV and a mini-van, like the Buick Rendezvous or Chrysler Pacifica are being specifically requested, and those are fairly new names in the lexicon," he said.

At Dan McCormick's Kalkaska Auto & Truck, Sales Manager George Jorkasky said that the majority of their clients come seeking 4 x 4s, pickups and SUVs.

"They've got a lot of appeal because people feel safer in them and like that they have better vision and are higher off ground," said Jorkasky, whose company sells Ford, Chrysler, Dodge and Jeep vehicles. "Then factor in the way they're made today, with incredible creature comforts like DVD players, back up sensors, heated seats, power sliding windows and plush, cushy leather. We call them 'country Cadillacs' and believe me, they're very popular."

In the auto business for nearly 20 years, Jorkasky said the most radical industry changes have been domestically, with major improvements in quality both inside and out of cars.

"Whether you're talking air bags or carburetors, gas mileage or luxury features, everything has been geared to be easier, softer, more comfortable and appealing," he said. "Safety is still the biggest issue no matter what the car, which is why we've seen such a shift to the SUVs, but then people see something like a Mini Cooper and just have to have it."

Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.



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