

# Cars: Added attractions claim buyers' attention

BY ANN JOB

The Associated Press

Ah, we are becoming a spoiled bunch inside our cars and trucks.

The newest features appearing on 2004 vehicles show a trend toward easier-to-use phones, better sound systems, more comfort items, larger, let-in-the-sky roofs and new wheels.

For example, several Chrysler, Dodge and Jeep vehicles in 2004 offer UConnect, a hands-free voice-activated communications system that includes Bluetooth technology.

Bluetooth is a short-range wireless technology. A driver only needs to bring his or her Bluetooth-enabled phone into the vehicle, and it will be recognized by the car's UConnect, allowing pre-programmed phone numbers to be dialed via voice commands during travel, and phone conversations to be held via a microphone and speakers in the vehicle — all hands-free.

The cell phone itself can be placed anywhere in the vehicle during this time, even the glove box or trunk, and phone conversations can continue, uninterrupted, via the driver's cell phone, after a vehicle is parked and the driver departs.

Consumers can use their current cell phone carrier and telephone number, and UConnect can be programmed to recognize up to five phones.

Suggested retail installation price is \$275, if done at the factory, and \$299, if done at a dealership, according to officials at DaimlerChrysler's Chrysler Group.

There is no ongoing UConnect subscription fee, but consumers must pay their monthly cell phone bills.

UConnect is available on such varied vehicles as the 2004 Dodge Ram pickup truck and Chrysler PT Cruiser.

While the Chrysler Group is the first North American-based automaker to bring Bluetooth into the car, it's not expected to be the last.

Bluetooth officials predict the technology will be in 20 percent of all vehicles by 2007.

Audio systems continue to get better in the newest vehicles.

For 2004, several General Motors Corp. brands are adding MP3-playing capability to their sound systems. MP3, which is short for MPEG-1 Layer 3, is an audio compression format common on the Internet.

For 2004, Saturn offers new audio systems which can play CDs as well as the MP3 format in its Saturn Ion small car and Vue sport utility vehicle.

At Pontiac, MP3-playing audio systems are available on the 2004 Sunfire, Aztek, Montana and Grand Am. Prices for the upgrade to the MP3-playing audio systems are \$220 in the 2004 Ion coupe and \$225 in the Montana minivan.

The new model year continues the proliferation of satellite radio, too. Offered by XM or Sirius, these radios provide about 100 stations with specialized content — many of them commercial-free — plus improved reception and a range that allows a driver to listen to one station in all 48 contiguous states.

For 2004, GM expands its XM radio offerings to more vehicles, including the Chevrolet Venture, where the feature is priced at \$325, and the Pontiac Vibe, where it's priced at \$325 on top of a requisite \$850 option package. There's also an ongoing subscription charge for XM satellite radio.

BMW makes Sirius satellite radio available as an option on its 7-Series in 2004. This year, Sirius also became available at Chrysler, Dodge and Jeep dealerships as a Mopar aftermarket accessory for a variety of vehicles, including the Jeep Liberty and Dodge Neon.

Suggested retail price for installation is a minimum \$299. There's also an ongoing subscription of \$12.95 a month.

And with the debut of the 2004 Chrysler Pacifica and 300M, Sirius radio is a new factory option at the Chrysler Group. Factory installation pricing starts at \$295.

The increasing sophistication of heating and cooling

systems inside vehicles is another, er, hot trend.

For example, the 2004 Cadillac DeVille offers heated and cooled seats as well as a heated steering wheel for the first time.

And the 2004 Honda Accord Coupe and Accord sedan with V-6 get an updated climate control system that adds a global positioning satellite feature so the system can gauge the direction and heat of the sun and adjust its workings accordingly.

Chevy is even making sure its 2004 Malibu is nice and warm — or thankfully cool — for drivers before they get inside or even approach the car.

The new Malibu becomes the first auto in its class with a remote starting system offered as a factory option. Priced at \$150, it lets a driver remotely start the ignition of the new Malibu and idle the car so the heater or air conditioner can begin to work well in advance of anyone climbing inside. The starter can activate the car from 200 feet away.

Entertainment systems continue to be offered on more vehicles this model year — and the newest models to add this feature aren't family-hauling minivans. They're cars and pickup trucks.

Example: The 2004 Chevy Malibu Maxx car seats only five but offers an optional DVD-based, rear-seat entertainment center. The display screen pulls up from the back of the console between the two front seats. Suggested retail price is \$995. (See cover.) The 2004 Nissan Titan pickup truck can be had with a DVD-based, rear-seat entertainment system, called the mobile theater. It includes a 350-watt, ten-speaker Rockford Fosgate-powered stereo. Pricing not available.

This certainly seems to be the year for new roof treatments.

Nissan's 2004 Quest has an optional Skyview roof that lets more than just the front-seat riders enjoy a view of the sky overhead.

Cadillac's new SRX crossover has a power

UltraView Plus roof that's the biggest sunroof in the segment. There's 5 feet of open-air space above front and second-row riders, and third-row riders get a vented rear glass panel for a total of 7 square feet of sky view in the vehicle. UltraView roofs for the SRX have a starting price of \$1,800.

Wheels are updated at a number of automakers for 2004 to make a bolder styling statement, and it doesn't seem

to matter if the vehicle is a new car, truck or SUV.

For example, in 2004, the Chevy TrailBlazer gets new 17-inch aluminum wheels, that Chevy calls bright aluminum, as an option. They are priced at \$150 and require a \$140 upgrade for new tires, too.

All 2004 Mercedes-Benz C-Class sport coupes and sedans come standard with 17-inch, alloy wheels fitted with performance tires.

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