Late-entry C-Max seeks a niche

Ford uses seating, diesels and future adaptability to make up for late arrival

**BRADFORD WILKINSON**

AUTOMOTIVE NEWS EUROPE

GRAZ, Austria – Ford will use seating flexibility, electronic architecture and new diesels to make its C-Max stand out in the crowded compact minivan market.

Ford knows it is a late entrant in the segment pioneered by Renault seven years ago so it added some distinctive features to compete, such as a different rear-seating approach.

Other companies, especially archrival Opel, already have introduced models with flexible seating. By Zafira, which has seven seats.

Ford’s flexible seating setup actually reduces the number of seats from five to four. By folding the middle seat into the back, the left and right rear seats can be slid backward and slightly toward the center to create more legroom. Ford marketers refer to this seating arrangement as “business class.”

“We challenged the thinking that seven seats is the peak of entry into the segment,” said Christof Kellerwessel, C-Max launch manager. “Our research indicated two extra seats are not very desirable.”

Ford is aiming the C-Max at young owners with active lifestyles who need plenty of cargo space but don’t want to sacrifice driveability.

The company’s research shows that half of all potential C-Max customers don’t want to sacrifice driveability.

Ford engineers say the C-Max has the most sophisticated electronic architecture of any car Ford has built in Europe. The C-Max has two buses (electronic circuits that connect microprocessors) connecting up to 25 modules. That compares to just a handful of modules on the current Focus.

“What it means is we have the opportunity to grow the car in functionality without changing the hardware,” Kellerwessel said. For example, Ford could add a feature such as voice-controlled navigation in future models by writing new software.

The C-Max is the first car Ford has introduced from its C1 Technologies program. Both Mazda and Volvo also participated. The Mazda 3 and Volvo S40, also from the same program, will debut at next month’s IAA in Frankfurt.

The C-Max is also the first Ford to use an engine from Ford’s diesel joint venture with PSA/Peugeot-Citroen. It will have two Duratorq TDCi diesels: a 1.6-liter, 199hp version and a 2.0-liter, 182hp version.

And a 1.6-liter, 130hp gasoline engine will be offered.

The C-Max goes on sale in September, starting in Scandinavia, then Germany and the UK. Prices in Germany will range from €19,000 for a basic Ambiente to €25,000 for the top-of-the-line Ghia.

Ford plans to make 90,000 C-Maxes at its Saarlouis, Germany, plant before the end of this year and 170,000 in 2004.

BMW 5 series adds technology, luxury features to fight E class

**ALEX GRAHAM**

AUTOMOTIVE NEWS EUROPE

BMW’s new 5 series adds technology and luxury equipment to compete with the Mercedes-Benz E class in which it was introduced in the US in 2003.

The 5 series uses advanced chassis production technology and is packed with innovations, many developed by suppliers.

The front subframe or cradle is all aluminum while the rest of the body-in-white is made from tradi tional materials.

The front fender, hood and the front and rear suspension arms are also aluminum. The new 5 series is 79lbs lighter than its predecessor. Several supplier-developed technologies are aimed at increasing comfort and convenience.

German steering systems supplier ZF Lenksysteme’s radical Active Steering is the closest to a new-by-wire system in production. By adding an electronic override to standard rack-and-pinion power steering, the steering ratio can be varied to suit driving conditions. Active Steering is also expected to be offered on the 4 series coupe, which will debut in September at the Frankfurt IAA.

German chassis supplier ZF Friedrichshafen supplies the dynamic-drive suspension system, which is the forerunner for the 7 series. The system provides active input onto the vehicle’s anti-roll bars to keep the body of the car flat while cornering. Robert Bosch will supply the Active Cruise Control which is already on the 7 series.

The system maintains a pre-set distance from the vehicle in front by reducing speed if traffic slows down. Once the road ahead is clear, Active Cruise Control retums the vehicle to the original cruising speed.

A simplified, second-generation Drive controller interface also comes from the 7 series. Many 7 series owners disliked the original iDrive – it was difficult to learn and prone to malfunction. BMW defended the device’s potential and stuck with it in the 5 series.

Swiveling lights

Hella’s adaptive front lights are available as an option in combination with bi-xenon headlights. Adaptive front lights can swivel up to 15 degrees horizontally as drivers steer around corners. The rear lights also offer Brake Force Display technology. Using light emitting diodes as the light source, the system causes the brake lights to shine brighter as the driver presses the brake pedal harder. Coupled with LED light-up turn indicators, the driver can see the conventional bulb’s Brake Force Display can alert following drivers to heavy braking.

The feature is switched off.

Another advanced feature is the German VDO head-up display available as an option starting in 2004. By passing an illumination source through a thin film transistor display behind the instrument cluster, information can be projected onto the windshield. This is claimed to be a useful feature at a time when the time taken for the driver to look at the instrument cluster can focus on the road. About one second to about a half second.

The display appears to float around two meters in front of the driver’s position, rather than appearing on the windshield.

One mirror in the projection unit is adjustable, and the system monitors the driver’s light to dim the display when necessary.