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Automakers show a little razzle-dazzle as press days wind down

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DETROIT — As the press preview days for the North American International Auto Show (NAIAS) wind down, automakers are pulling out all the stops to maintain media interest. Saab put on the dog, Porsche vowed to "show you a good time" and Saturn made history.

In other show news, DaimlerChrysler announced its strongest sales year ever. In 1998, combined worldwide sales for the Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep and Plymouth brands surpassed the three-million mark for the first time.

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Nissan Concepts

Following up on yesterday's Xterra introduction, Nissan unveiled two concept cars that seem to indicate a two-tiered approach by the Japanese automaker to revive sagging U.S. sales: Bring back new versions of past classics, and hop on the crossover-vehicle trend sweeping the industry.

Nissan Z

Nissan unveiled the [Z concept coupe](#) Tuesday at a packed NAIAS press conference. The metallic yam-hued sheet metal slopes in the front and curves in the rear, in a dawn-of-the-millennium interpretation of the original 240Z.



Nissan Z

Back when Nissan introduced the 1970 Datsun 240Z, it featured sleek styling, a 150-horsepower inline-6 engine and sold for \$3,526. The Z concept coupe shown Tuesday afternoon is a prototype for a production model that could sell for less than \$25,000. The rear-wheel-drive concept coupe has a 200-horsepower, 2.4-liter four-cylinder power plant and a five-speed manual transmission.

Inside the two-door hatchback coupe are two high-back bucket seats and rear seat "scoops" that could accommodate a small gym bag or bag of groceries. Orange frosted glass around the display panel and some interior chrome accents complement the charcoal-gray seats and carpeting. Other features include:

- cloth- and leather-trimmed interior
- electronically operated doors
- tinted front and side glass

The coupe is one of two Nissan concepts to be shown on the Auto Show circuit this year, with the second vehicle to be introduced at the Chicago Auto Show in February.

Nissan SUT

Nissan's [Sport Utility Truck](#) concept is another entrant in the crossover vehicle category, a segment dominating this year's Detroit auto show. The SUT fuses the front and interior of a sport utility vehicle with the open bed of a pickup, similar to the way the [Lincoln Blackwood](#) borrows from the Lincoln Navigator and a Ford F-Series truck.



Nissan SUT

One difference between the Nissan concept and other utility/pickup hybrids is the SUT's hatchback "door" that allows access to the cab from the truck's bed. Lifting the rear-compartment door and folding the rear seats forward substantially increases the storage capacity of this short-bed vehicle.

The four-door SUT's all-steel body features two-tone yellow custom paint. Powered by a 170-horsepower 3.3-liter V-6, the hybrid concept is equipped with a four-speed, electronically controlled automatic transmission and part-time four-wheel drive.

Saab 9-5 Wagon

None of their vehicles requires a stepladder to enter, and neither the 9-3 nor the 9-5 could be described as menacing. So how does Saab plan to expand its appeal to U.S. consumers? On Tuesday it introduced the [9-5 Wagon](#), the first Saab station wagon in 25 years. While the rest of the industry is fusing sedans, minivans, SUVs and trucks into crossover vehicles that look better suited for navigating lunar craters than urban potholes, the Swedish automaker has decided to offer a luxury wagon that appeals to a small — but growing — market for a car with additional cargo space.



Saab 9-5 Wagon

As Saab designer Simon Padian noted in response to a comment pointing out the lack of truck- or van-like vehicles in the company's lineup, "There may be a lot of growth in all-wheel drive, but there are still a lot of people buying what we're selling."

Although not as spacious as some "people movers," the 9-5 Wagon makes good use of its internal volume. Either one or both rear seats can be folded forward to increase cargo space. Innovations include an optional sliding floor feature, which can be rolled out almost 20 inches, and the Cargo Tracks system of aluminum rails that allow users to secure various cargo configurations without load shifting.



Saab 9-5 Wagon

Tuesday's presentation even included a demonstration, aided by purebred Siberian Husky Stormin' Norman, of a leash mechanism that slides on the Cargo Tracks, allowing animal movement in the cargo hold.

Conceived and styled simultaneously with the 9-5 sedan, the 9-5 Wagon has a long roofline, wraparound glass and a forward-sloping rear hatch. Viewed from the rear, the car makes a wide impression.

The 9-5 Wagon will be available with two engine choices: either a 200-horsepower, 3.0-liter turbocharged power plant or a 170-horsepower, 2.3-liter, light-pressure-turbo four cylinder.

As with the 9-3 and 9-5, the Wagon will come standard with many safety features, such as Saab's active head-restraint front airbags. A price for the 9-5 Wagon won't be announced until this spring.

Saturn SC coupes



Saturn SC2

Late last year Saturn began equipping its SC1 and SC2 coupes with a driver's-side third door. Pricing on the 1999 coupes is competitive; the SC1 is \$150 less than the 1998 model, and the SC2, with its 124-horsepower DOHC four-cylinder engine, is \$150 more than last year's version.

Although Saturn's Tuesday press conference was meant to showcase its three-door SC coupes, this event was really a coming-out party for Cynthia M. Trudell, Saturn's new chairman and president. Trudell, who has a doctorate in physical chemistry and 20 years of automotive industry experience, joined Saturn on Jan. 1.

One of the positions Trudell formerly held was that of plant manager of the Wilmington Assembly Center in Delaware. Beginning next year, the Wilmington plant will be a dedicated plant producing Saturn's all-new midsize L-Series models. The L-Series will be the second line of cars produced by the GM division and will join the S-Series.

Saturn also used Tuesday's event as a chance to publicly acknowledge the contributions of the United Auto Workers and the good working

relationship between the company and the union. Two UAW leaders were invited on stage to make remarks, and all Saturn booth attendants wore matching cream-colored V-neck sweaters that featured both the company and union logos.

Porsche Carrera 4

Reinforcing the importance of maintaining a strong presence at the Detroit auto show, Porsche had a panel of four high-ranking company officials on hand to announce the introduction of the newest Carrera. The [1999 Carrera 4](#) comes with full-time all-wheel drive and a five-speed Tiptronic S automatic transmission.



Porsche Carrera 4

The new Carrera 4 is powered by a 296-horsepower 3.4-liter V-6. It's available as both a coupe and as a cabriolet, which is equipped with a removable hardtop. The Carrera 4 is expected to roll into dealerships within the next few days.

Although the 1999 Porsche Carrera 4 introduction was the slated topic, the audience was more interested in hearing about the planned joint venture between Porsche and Volkswagen that will result in a 2002 sport utility vehicle. Porsche chairman Wendelin Wiedeking confirmed that such a vehicle was being developed but didn't release any specifics on pricing.

When asked how a sport ute would fit in with Porsche's stable of sporty vehicles, Frederick J. Schwab, president of Porsche Cars North America, pointed out that owners of both 911s and Boxsters tend to have a sedan, an SUV and a Porsche in their three-car garages, and that they purchase, on average, a new vehicle every 18 months. "This gives us a chance to sell them two out of those three vehicles," he said.

Reported by [Mary S. Butler](#), [cars.com](#)

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