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Big wheels keep on turning, but are they worth it?

By [Salvatore Caputo](#) • Bankrate.com

Everywhere you look these days, you're likely to see tricked-out cars. Custom wheels in particular have become all the rage. Some \$3.23 billion was spent on custom wheels in 2002, up from \$3.1 billion in 2001 and \$2.9 billion in 2000, according to the Specialty Equipment Market Association.

"The custom wheel industry is made up of several hundred very big and small companies selling wheels that make a car or truck look better and perform better," says Peter MacGillivray, SEMA's vice president of marketing and communications.

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soccer moms who deliver hordes of kids to activities, all of whom outfit vehicles with custom accessories to accommodate their lifestyles.

"The trend also extends to the youth market," he says. "You've got high school kids saying, 'Just because I've inherited a Honda Civic with 140,000 miles on it doesn't mean it has to look like it's my mom's car. It doesn't mean I can't look cool.'"

Custom wheels are particularly attractive to kids. Wheels are among the easiest items to change from stock to custom parts, MacGillivray points out, and the change in appearance from the dull steel colors of most original wheels to shiny chrome is sexy. Let's face it, flashy cars and sex appeal have been associated with one another for a long, long time.

But isn't trying to make a Honda Civic sexy kind of, well, impossible?

Not when it's the only belle you can bring to the ball, says Mary Butler, a [Cars.com](#) automotive expert. According to SEMA statistics, the average custom wheel buyer is an 18 to 34-year-old male, Butler says. "What kind of cars were they driving 20, 30 years ago? That would be

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The biggest, most noticeable, trend in custom wheels is plus wheels because they immediately make a car look like a racer. "The trend's being driven by unconventional marketing techniques," McGillivray says. "Video games and movies like 'The Fast and the Furious' use authentic brands from our industry."

It doesn't hurt that big, shiny chrome wheels have become a status symbol in rap music and among sports stars. Chrome wheels, once a mark of luxury, had become an afterthought by 1991, with sales flattening to \$1.26 billion, according to SEMA. After rappers like Snoop Dogg glorified such brands as Dayton wire wheels in their tunes, the race toward bigger, showier wheels was on. (The showy stuff includes "spinner" wheels, in which the hub of the wheel continues to spin after the vehicle has stopped.)

Racing wheels are typically very big, leaving little room in the wheel well for the tire's sidewall. "They increase the size of their wheel and then decrease the interior circumference of their tire," McGillivray says. "It affects performance. It's no accident that race car drivers have big wheels with smaller sidewalls. It enhances the performance on the road

go for as much as \$5,000 apiece.

"Mostly what people are getting from these upgrades is an image boost -- in their minds at least," he says. "There may be some performance improvement, depending on what they're putting on the vehicle and what their intentions are."

However, if you're not on a racetrack, performance improvement may not be your best investment.

"Your tire sidewall has a job: to absorb impact and energy from traveling on the road," Wiesenfelder says. "If the tire sidewalls aren't absorbing a lot of that energy, where's it going? Into the suspension. Manufacturers want to get 100,000 miles typically out of their suspension components. Upsized wheels make the suspension work a lot harder, and you'll be replacing shocks, springs or other suspension components much sooner. When you buy upsized wheels, you get to spend money to spend money as opposed to spending money to save money."

That's not to mention the potential for theft, Wiesenfelder says. If

grooves, so that instead of biting into snow, they slide around like sleds, he says.

For custom wheels that thrive on their cool image, that is a decidedly uncool picture.

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