

Toyota Matrix sports a new look, improved performance

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They say timing is everything and there are few places it plays a bigger role than in the automotive field.

Take Toyota for an example. The Japanese automaker has grown to be one of the world leaders through a combination of excellent products, competitive prices and having the right vehicles at the right time.

Case in point, the Toyota Corolla/Matrix models. These two compacts are what I would call the 'bread and butter' vehicles in the Toyota lineup and make up about one-third of all sales in Canada.

Last year, Corolla and Matrix sold 61,843 units here out of a total of approximately 200,000 unit sales overall. Not bad numbers at all.

So what does Toyota do? Well, they redesign both vehicles and come out with totally new 2009 models at the exact time that gasoline prices are starting to go through the roof and more and more people are starting to make the jump to a compact vehicle.

As a result, Toyota continues to set record after record in monthly sales and in May was up 15.2 per cent over the same month last year.

Leading the way was the Corolla with sales of 7,435 units, up 35.2 per cent over May of 2007. Meanwhile Matrix sales were up 5.5 per cent to 3,062 units.

I had a chance to drive both these cars during the launch in January and I remember saying at the time that there was a lot riding on these two Canadian-built vehicles since they make up such a hefty chunk of overall sales.

Obviously, if sales continue as they did in May, and there's no reason to think they won't, this is another example of having the right cars at the right time and a hint at why Toyota is so successful worldwide.

With only a brief time in the seat at the launch, I was looking forward to a longer test of a Corolla or Matrix. So in May, I picked up a Matrix for a week-long trip to a favourite haunt in Stowe, Vt.

While the Corolla outsells the Matrix by a fairly wide margin, I prefer the Matrix because of its hatchback (or 5-door wagon as Toyota refers to it) styling. It began life in February 2002 as a 2003 model and became an instant success. Last year it sold 21,369 units in Canada, making it one of the country's top sellers.

The new generation has a lower stance than the previous model, but not at the expense of interior space. Inside, many changes have been made including redesigned seats for added comfort, the introduction of a three-spoke tilt/telescopic steering wheel and a new console design.

Four trim levels are offered: base, XR, AWD and XRS. Engine choices include either a 1.8-litre or 2.4-litre four-cylinder. A four-speed manual transmission is standard with an available four-speed automatic. The XR and XRS offer the five-speed manual or an available five-speed automatic, while the AWD comes only with a four-speed automatic.

The AWD system is the same as the one in the RAV4 and works on-demand. When slippage is detected with the front wheels, up to 45 per cent of the torque can be transferred to the rear wheels to ensure smooth performance.

The Matrix has a MacPherson strut front suspension with a torsion beam at the rear on all but the AWD and XRS. For these two models, a double wishbone suspension is offered. All models have four-wheel disc brakes with an anti-lock braking system (ABS), electronic brake-force distribution (EBD) and brake assist (BA). Vehicle stability control and traction control are available on the XR and standard on the XRS.

All models come with six air bags plus an all-new active headrest system for front-seat passengers. In the



The 2009 Toyota Matrix comes in four trim levels, with two engine choices in its second generation. It is built in Cambridge, Ont. alongside the hot-selling Toyota Corolla. *Photo by Lorne Drury*

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