The 2009 Pontiac Vibe comes in three models including the AWD (all-wheel-drive), shown, that is suited to the changing road conditions of the Canadian climate.

Pontiac gets grip on a changing auto industry

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All-wheel-drive and downsized, frugal motoring are higher that ever on the minds of Canadians as oil (at this writing) is at almost $135/barrel.

You can drive down any street and see rows and rows of older, big SUVs crammed into the sales lots with the number of takers dwindling every time gas goes up another dollar.

Canadian Pontiac/GMC dealers already have a spread of CUV/SUVs, but with attention shifting to smaller is better, the Pontiac Vibe is in the right place at the right time.

The Vibe has always been a good seller but with available all-wheel-drive and 7.8L/100 km (36 mpg) highway fuel consumption, this five-door is gaining in popularity.

It is built in a factory in California, shared with - of all competitors— Toyota. This joint venture goes back about 20 years and has spawned a number of joint efforts, the Pontiac Vibe and Toyota Matrix being the latest examples.

Except for minor details, the Vibe is all Toyota except in name which is a good thing because buyers can expect the same level of build quality they would from a Matrix.

Several years ago, *Mississauga News* photographer Freddie ‘The Flashbulb’ Loek had a first generation Vibe with AWD that he flogged mercilessly, rarely remembering when it needed servicing. The only time it got washed was when it rained. But that little Vibe took everything Freddie could throw at it and kept coming back for more.

But what sticks in my mind most was how slow it was. For some reason the AWD version got a 118 hp engine instead of 126 for the non-AWD. With either version of the 1.8-litre four-cylinder, acceleration was leisurely and the little four-banger seemed to run out of breath higher up the rev range.

For 2009 there is still a 1.8-litre DOHC engine on the base Vibe, but it now is up to 132 hp and 128 lb/ft of torque. On the other two models, the AWD and the GT, there is a 2.4-litre DOHC motor with 158 hp and 162 lb/ft of torque. The 2.4-litre as tested here is an AWD model gets 10.3L/100 km (27 mpg) city in addition to the 7.8L/100 km (36 mpg) highway as mentioned above.

A five-speed manual transmission is standard on the base and GT with a four-speed automatic fitted to the AWD. There is a five-speed automatic with manual shift mode optional on the base and GT.

Instead of the discs/drums Freddie had, it’s now discs all around with ABS and StabiliTrak standard. While the base Vibe gets MacStruts and a twist beam at the rear, the AWD and GT get a more expensive, but better riding, independent system at the rear.

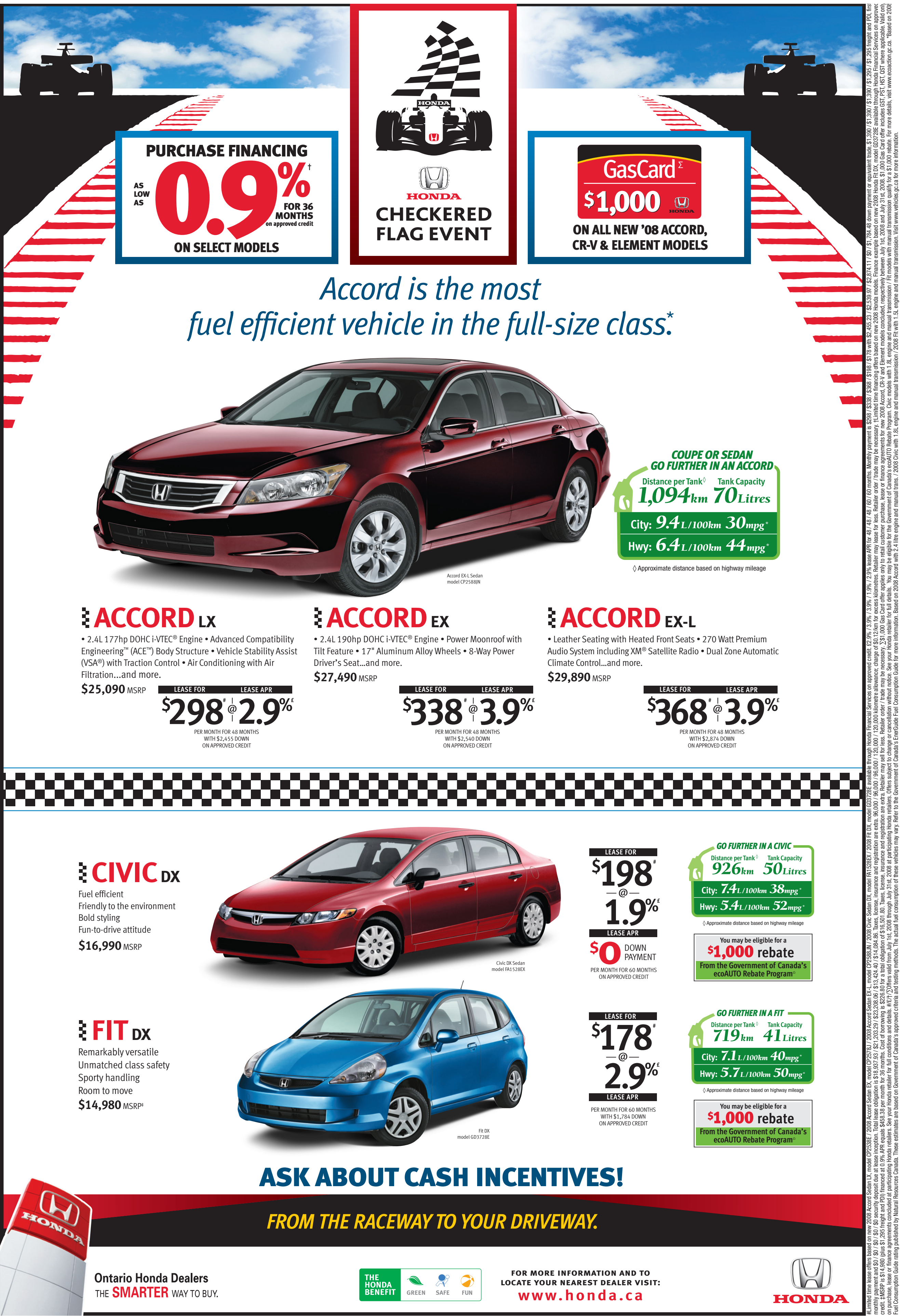
The increase in power was the first thing I noticed when I was involved earlier this year with the ‘Catch the Vibe’. It was a brand introduction contest involving a kind of scavenger hunt manned by media people as the cars moved across Canada and all of it strictly on the Internet.

For Ontario journalists, the object was to buzz around the Greater Toronto Area using cellphones to take shots of certain landmarks while sending blogs and twitters.

Apparently it was a big success, although I never was officially notified about who won.

But it did serve to show how the Vibe has grown from a grocery-getter to a vehicle that has a lot of uses and features that appeal in the post cheap gas era.

During the contest, the power to join the flow of traffic on the highway was noticeable. But more so was the way it accelerated away from downtown lights where taxi drivers hit the horn in milliseconds if you are too slow for their liking.

In the east end of Toronto with its cacophony of music blaring from small shops, overhead wires and oblivious jaywalkers, it took good brakes and adroit handling to weave our way to find a statue of Alexander the Great for the contest. Trying to find a parking space was tough enough let alone trying to squeeze into slots not much longer than the Vibe. Thanks to the speed-sensitive power steering it was made easier, plus the good sight lines let me know where the corners of the Vibe was.

See PONTIAC, pg. 7