

Chrysler minivans become "family rooms on wheels"

LORNE DRURY
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The Dodge Grand Caravan has undergone a major redesign for 2008 with 35 new and improved features.

CARLSBAD, CALIF.— While the minivan market isn't what it used to be as far as numbers are concerned, don't tell the folks at Chrysler that the van is a dying breed.

With Ford dropping its minivan altogether in favour of crossovers and GM also exiting the market this year, Chrysler is now looking at the minivan segment in North America as huge sales opportunity.

After all, Chrysler invented the minivan way back in 1983 with its Magic Wagon and has been the sales leader in market right from the get-go.

Now, as they prepare to trot out their fifth generation of these popular people-movers in the form of the 2008 Dodge Grand Caravan and Chrysler Town & Country, Chrysler looks to increase its penetration in this family segment with redesigned entries that are even more functional and less costly than the versions they are replacing.

"There's not a single product that is more important to Chrysler Canada than the minivan," said president and CEO Ried Bigland, addressing a group of automotive journalists at the recent launch of the new minivans.

Minivans are "truly the bread and butter of Chrysler Canada," he added, noting that 4,200 minivans were sold by Chrysler Canada in July alone.

Overall, minivans make up the third largest segment in the Canadian automotive market with sales of 171,000 units last year, about 11 per cent of the total market.

Of that, Chrysler sold 62,524 minivans

in 2006, while GM and Ford combined for 54,970. Chrysler hopes to pick up a lot of those customers with their redesigned entries when they're ready for their next vehicle purchase.

"Where are those 54,000 customers who are currently driving minivans going to go?," asked Bigland, adding there is no other vehicle in the market that can comfortably transport seven passengers and has the functionality and value of the minivan.

For 2008, five different trim levels will be offered on the Dodge and Chrysler "family rooms on wheels" as they like to call them. No short-wheel base Caravan model will be available this time around, only the long wheel base Grand Caravan and Town & Country.

Price, as always, plays a major role in many automotive purchase decisions and Chrysler is offering a Canada Value Package edition to entice price-conscious buyers.

It starts at \$26,495, which is about \$3,800 less than the comparable outgoing 2007 model. A Grand Caravan SE with Stow 'n Go second row seating starts at \$28,795, while the top-of-the-line SXT is \$30,495.

The Chrysler Town & Country starts at \$35,995 for the Touring edition and \$42,895 for the Limited.

Styling wise, the new Grand Caravan and Town & Country have a much different look and, overall, boast 35 new and improved features that add to the functionality of the vehicle.

On the exterior, designers have gone to a more boxy, chiseled look with the traditional Dodge crosshair grille front and centre on the Grand Caravan. The Town & Country meanwhile has more of a Chrysler look to it, with design cues from the 300 sedan as well as the Sebring and Pacifica.

The popular Stow 'n Go seating system is available again along with a new feature- the Swivel 'n Go system. Here, the mid-row bucket seats swivel around to face the rear, similar to third-row seating found in many of the nine-passenger station wagons of years gone by.

But here with the Swivel 'n Stow system comes a removable table, great for dining, a card game or a flat surface for your laptop. When not in use, the table and stand go in a storage bin in the floor.

With Stow 'n Go, the second and third row seats fold neatly into the floor. When upright, the floor compartments provide plenty of usable space.

Both systems have their advantages, but the catch is you can't have both. With the Canada Value Package you get a third option- a second row 60/40 split bench seat with a third row Stow 'n Go system.

These seating systems are designed with family in mind, as are other innovations that are aimed squarely at the younger set.

Chief among them is the dual entertainment systems that allow for the use of different media at the same time. So now, one child can watch a movie while another plays video games, or both can watch different videos at the same time. Meanwhile, dad or mom can listen to

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