

Saturn has a Vue on expanding its customer base

By **JIM ROBINSON**
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Ramped up at the start of the 1990s, Saturn was conceived as being Japanese-like with products long on durability if not in style. Pushing the marketing gambit of being enviro-conscious with

features like rust-free polymer body panels and a no-quibble pricing policy, Saturn was designed to appeal to those who were who looked at cars as a necessary evil.

One of the first things to go was the rubber bodies. Focus groups all said they liked the no rust, no dent body panels that set Saturn apart,

but they were not prepared to pay extra over the cost of steel.

In the small Canadian CUV/SUV market, pricing is everything because there are so many choices these days. Saturn put the sticker on the outgoing 2007 base Vue at \$23,595. The base 2008 adds standard curtain/thorax airbags, active head

restraints (hooray for Saturn), Stabilitrak pitch and yaw control, automatic transmission, ABS, XM satellite radio, and 16-inch alloys for a price of \$26,990. Had the 2007 been standard with all of this, the equivalent price would have been \$27,840.

I spent a morning driving through the Terra Cotta, Orangeville, Blue Mountains and Beaver Valley areas of Ontario with Betsy Chisholm, product manager, truck division for Saturn. A veteran of 17 years at Saturn, Chisholm made no bones about Saturn going through tough times and told how managers agonized about what had to change within the division to keep it from going the way of Oldsmobile.

She was proudest of the look of the Vue, with definitely styling cues taken from the Sky and Aura such as the large headlights and the tight wheel to body fits.

With a very short front overhang, the Vue can negotiate tight confines like a walkway I snuck down to take Chisholm to the Old Stanton Store in Blue Mountain Village. Don't miss this incredible gift shop if you're ever in the area.

The Vue comes in three basic versions starting with the base XE in front-drive (FWD) only with a 2.4-litre Ecotec four-cylinder engine (169 hp, 161 lb/ft) with a four-speed automatic starting at \$26,990. Next up is the XE all-wheel-drive with 3.5-Litre OHV V6 (222 hp, 219 lb/ft) with a six-speed automatic starting at \$31,275. The XR is the topline version with 3.6-Litre twin cam V6 with variable valve timing (257 hp, 241 lb/ft) in FWD/AWD with a six-speed automatic at \$31,335/\$33,920. There is also the Red Line version of the XR FWD/AWD priced at \$36,020/\$38,605. It comes with "unique" ebony interior with suede seat inserts, "tap shift" on the automatic, sport tuned suspension, 18-inch alloy wheels and very aggressive front and rear spoilers.

A hybrid based on the 2.4-litre engine is coming in fall and a two-mode hybrid using the 3.6-litre V6 is due in 2008.

The AWD system is proactive instead of reactive. Instead of starting to shift torque back and forth after grip has been lost, the Vue's system checks wheel speed to see if one or more wheels are slipping. As well it monitors throttle and steering angle. Torque is normally 99 per cent at the front axle but can shift to as much as 80 per cent to the rear. In short, the system comes into play before the wheel(s) start losing grip and it's too late.

I drove both the XR and XE with the V6 engines, no fours being available at the test. I didn't detect a lot of power difference between the two, but then, I was cruising country roads at well below the posted limit instead of trying to keep up with the hectic flow of traffic on Highway 401.

Interestingly the XR, with its "tap shift" in sequential mode, gets .1L/100 km city/highway better mileage than the automatic because it shifts quicker.

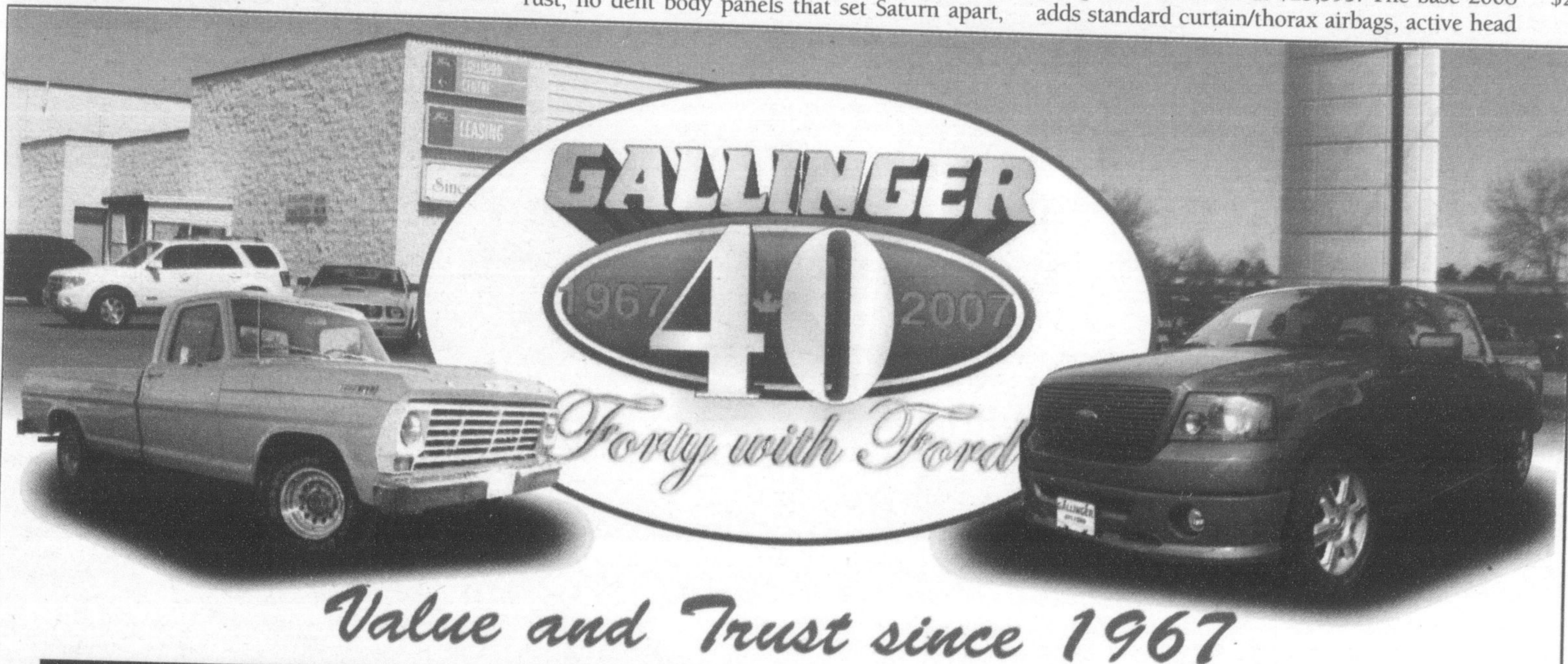
Chisholm was nervous because the Vue I was driving was a very early pre-production model, number 19 in fact, off the line. She apologized for a difference in the hue of two parts of the centre console and the look of the webbing used in the seat belts.

Honestly, if she hadn't pointed it out, I never would have noticed.

It wasn't much of a test of the AWD system, but I did pull off onto a rocky beach along the Lake Huron shore to get some images of the Vue with a summer thunderstorm trying to boil up in the background over the lake. The point here is the AWD systems of today can get vehicles like the Vue in and out of low traction situations where this same truck of a decade ago would have feared to tread.

Saturn is evolving even as you read this. A conquest sale is when your vehicle proves more attractive to a buyer than the one he/she owns. The 2007 Aura sedan is currently showing a 38 per cent conquest rate while the full-size Outlook CUV is hitting a full 71 per cent.

Keep your eye on Saturn and enjoy the Vue.





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