

WHEELS

# Chrysler's minivan turns 15

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On Nov. 2, 1983, the first of millions of Chrysler magic wagons or minivans came down the production line in Windsor.

Selling about 1.2 million minivans over the past four years, the magic wagon may have turned 15, but it is selling to a segment that remains unquenched and has become increas-

ingly competitive.

Chrysler began initial development of the minivan in 1977 and gave it the go in 1980 thanks to a \$1.5 billion loan Chrysler got from the U.S. federal government to keep the company from going under.

Since the first model, Chrysler has sold about seven million minivans and

owns about 45 per cent of the market.

The Dodge Caravan, for instance, has been averaging 300,000 sales per year for the past 14 years.

The Plymouth Voyager is also the lowest-priced minivan on the market and is an economy portal into the minivan segment for many consumers.

But what about the next 15 years? Will all minivans come to look alike?

"At Chrysler, it's important to note we design our minivans from the inside out," said minivan platform general project manager, Ralph Sarotte.

"We've learned a lot over the past 15 years about what a minivan is, and more importantly, what a minivan isn't."

"We know that some of the basic, critical ingredients of the minivan formula include four doors, removable fold-down seats, a low flat floor and a design that offers relatively effortless ingress and egress."

Having attracted a wide range of buyers, the future seems to be splitting

minivans into segments like luxury and leisure.

For example, the Chrysler Pacifica concept van hints at what the year 2000 Town and Country may look like.

The luxury-equipped Town and Country has seen sales increase 117 per cent thanks to those seeking minivan accoutrements with premium sedan fittings.

"Our Pacifica concept minivan was inspired by the luxury and convenience offered in executive jet travel," said director of design, Neil Walling.

"We wanted Pacifica to bring the benefits of executive jet travel down to Earth into the minivan and on to the road."

With two fully reclining chairs at the back, the Pacifica features a skylight that runs the length of the roof. Overhead storage bins are an idea right out of jetliner travel. There's a special

See CHRYSLER, page 21.

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