Automakers put on game face for Super Bowl ads

Laura Clark Geist

DETROIT — As Alan Mulally’s “one Ford” vision starts to take shape, Ford Motor Co. is developing a global design theme for next-generation blue Oval-brand cars.

North American design chief Peter Horbury and European design chief Martin Smith are working on one common design palette for Ford-brand cars. The new design language eventually will replace Ford of Europe’s current kinetic design theme and Ford North America’s three-bar grille introduced with the 2006 Fusion sedan, said J Mays, Ford Motor’s group vice president of design.

“We feel we’ll be able to get to a common design language that’s bold, as it should be for the American market, and is absolutely applicable to the European market as well,” Mays said.

The shared design initiative is an outgrowth of new CEO Mulally’s mandate to improve product development efficiency. Around the world, many Ford-brand cars will have the same exterior sheet metal, green-houses and interiors. Ford Motor global product chief Derrick Kuzak said in early January.

Mays said the work of merging Ford-brand design will take as long as seven years. When complete, “you should be able to get off a plane anywhere in the world and say, ‘Oh, yeah, there’s a Ford,’ ” Mays said.

Ford’s designers say they will take care to satisfy more than the lowest common denominator.

“The critical thing is not to design a car that would only sell in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean,” said Horbury, who is English.

That challenge is helped by shifting preferences for vehicle size. European cars are creeping up in size, and the difference between markets can now be measured in millimeters instead of inches, Mays said.

Ford will study Saturn, which is rebadging some of General Motors’ European Opel-brand vehicles, Mays said. He also expressed admiration for Honda’s global products.

Kuzak said customizing Ford-brand cars to the tastes of their respective markets is imperative for the “one Ford” initiative to succeed. That means vehicles will be tuned for local roads. He said they’ll also need distinct front-end design, probably including separate grilles. The current three-bar grille in the United States could evolve as part of the plan.

Ford brand plans global design theme

Amy Wilson

Toyota’s sights are not on its next new assembly plant or even the one after that. Now that it has shot past General Motors in the U.S. sales race, Toyota needs to add an assembly line every year to achieve its goal of 60 percent local production.

Toyota’s North American production was 55.4 percent of North American sales, ended the past four years, all bets are off.

Even if sales creep up at a more modest yearly rate of 6 percent — Toyota’s standard long-term projection — they’ll hit 4.7 million units by 2015. Toyota would require 2.8 million units of capacity to achieve 60 percent local production. That means adding about 1.2 million units.

If Toyota somehow kept up its torrid 10 percent average annual pace of the past four years, all bets are off. Sales would be well above 6.6 million units in North America by the middle of the decade.

And it’s not just about assembly plants. Toyota’s North American sales have grown by an average of 8.6 percent annually over the past decade. At that rate they would reach 3.9 million units by 2010 and 5.9 million by 2015.

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