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Automotive News World Congress

Customers talk, Chrysler listens

'New Day' campaign features 56 extra features added to 12 popular vehicles.

Eric Morath / The Detroit News

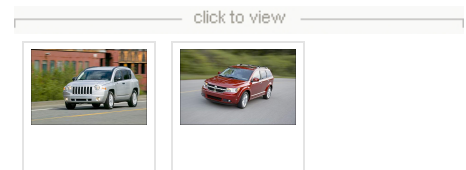
DETROIT -- More of Chrysler LLC's cars, trucks and minivans soon will offer extra features -- without extra cost -- to prove that under private ownership Chrysler can nimbly respond to consumer demands, just at the automaker's new leaders have promised.

Chrysler's "New Day" advertising blitz, kicking off next month, will tout changes including the addition of 56 new features to 12 popular vehicles.

Among them: An entry-level Dodge Grand Caravan with the popular Stow 'n Go seating formerly standard on more well-appointed models of the minivan.



2008 Jeep Compass (Jeep/Chrysler)



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Another star of the new campaign will be a Dodge Charger with standard 17-inch aluminum wheels, said Deborah Myer, Chrysler's chief marketing officer, at the Automotive News World Congress being held at the Renaissance Center.

Making more amenities like the fold-away Stow 'n Go seating standard across various price points also helps simplify Chrysler's parts sourcing and manufacturing process -- a move analysts say will save the automaker money.

But Meyer stressed that "New Day" is all about responding to the customer.

"I've never seen a manufacturer move this fast to make changes," said Meyer, who joined Chrysler last year after stints with Toyota Motor Corp. and Ford Motor Co.

The 56 features are part of 260 product enhancements in the works at Chrysler, which are expected to cost \$500 million to implement.

"We're going to prove that we are listening and responding and changing faster than ever before," she said.

To emphasize that the automaker is listening to its customers, Meyer said Chrysler also is creating an online Consumer Advisory Board. The board, which could include up to 2,000 members, will give the automaker immediate feedback on products and marketing. A group of young, female Dodge customers will be among the first subcommittees formed as Chrysler seeks to broaden the truck-heavy brand's appeal to new demographics.

The creation of the board expands upon the larger strategy Meyer has implemented.

She's moved Chrysler away from heavy reliance on television advertising and

Extras

New day, new features

As part of its "New Day" campaign Chrysler is making 56 product improvements across 12 models. Here are some examples:

- Dodge Grand Caravan SE: Stow 'N Go seating on entry-level model
 - Dodge Charger SE Plus: 3.5-liter V-6 engine, Sirius satellite radio, 17-inch aluminum wheels, new color options
 - Dodge Journey: Engine options limited to 2.4-liter four-cylinder and 3.5-liter V-6 engine
 - Jeep Compass and Jeep Patriot: New interior fabrics, softer to-the-touch materials, better door handles
- Source: Chrysler LLC

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into more narrowly focused, viral marketing. For example, on the automaker's YouTube page, Chrysler 300 designer Ralph Gilles challenges car customizers to improve the vehicle and post videos of their "ride" on the site. The winner will show his or her souped-up 300 at the Los Angeles auto show in November.

The 12 vehicles featured in the "New Day" campaign are among Chrysler's highest volume products, Meyer said. Improving interiors and simplifying powertrain and option packages are part of the program.

Dealer feedback, for instance, led Chrysler to scrap additional engine options for the Dodge Journey crossover, which will debut later this year.

Making more higher-end features standard could appeal to price-conscious buyers, but it will also help Chrysler to trim costs, said Aaron Bragman, automotive research analyst at Global Insight Inc.

"It reduces complexity, lowers cost and improves profitability," he said.

"They can try to bill it as a marketing change, but it's almost certainly about ease of manufacturing."

For Chrysler to be successful with its customer-first marketing, it needs to show that these changes are the first of many, said Michael Bernacchi, marketing professor at University of Detroit-Mercy. Otherwise Chrysler risks consumers asking: Why weren't they listening before?

"Since the 1970s companies have brought together consumers and then tried to market around their suggestions -- most of those consumer panels fizzled," he said.

"For this to work, (Chrysler) needs to be very up-front with the consumer that they will implement what the customer wants, not what they think the customer wants."

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