

Antique and Classic Cars, Automobiles, Vans, Sport Utility Vehicles, Trucks, Tractors, Trailers, Buses, Motorcycles, Motor Homes, Recreational Vehicles

Automobiles

MB

Section 12

BEHIND THE WHEEL/2005 Scion tC

Who's Your Daddy? Staid Toyota Gets a Hip Implant

By NICK KURCZEWSKI

SCION is the wild child of the reserved, respectable Toyota family — the tattooed, body-pierced, trend-setting offspring with a homework assignment: bring some fresh faces into the showrooms. On sale in California since June of last year, Scions became available only this summer in the rest of the country.

So far, the best-known Scion (pronounced SIGH-un) has been the quirky xB, generally known as “the boxy one.” Its Legoland looks are polarizing, yet love it or hate it, the xB gets noticed. Much to Toyota’s surprise, the xB is outselling the more mainstream xA hatchback by 2 to 1.

The nationwide rollout of the Scion brand coincides with the introduction of a third car, the 2005 tC hatchback coupe. Like the other Scions, this \$16,465 model pools in the shallow end of the new-car pricing pool; the xA is \$13,795 and the xB is \$14,195.

In a recent interview, Jim Farley, vice president of Scion, said California had served as a first-year “laboratory” for the brand. Data from AutoPacific, an automotive research company, indicates that the experiment paid off: 76 percent of Scion buyers were first-time Toyota customers.

Though they are hardly expensive, Scions are not being marketed as economy cars — commercials place them in urban settings with a thumping hip-hop backdrop. Mr. Farley said Scion’s marketing tactics were neither confrontational nor traditional; instead, buyers can “discover Scion” by themselves, at their own pace.

Scion has the youngest customers of any car company, with an average age of 38. Drivers tend to be younger still, since many parents buy the cars for their children. Strong sales among minorities have also validated Scion’s urban-theme campaign.

Creating a youth-oriented line of cars is a daunting task. Several car companies, including Toyota itself, have tried to seduce



2005 Scion tC.

Generation Y only to be rebuffed like a lounge lizard prowling a college bar. Honda thought it had the youth market covered with its Element — a sort of Swiss Army knife on wheels — but while that boxy car has sold fairly well, it has often gone to baby

“you’d better come out with cars that are refreshing and honest.”

Two-thirds of Toyota dealerships have agreed to sell Scions, setting up special areas where potential buyers can relax, examine the vehicles and “customize” them on computers linked to Scion’s Web site.

This ease of customization is vital to Scion’s credibility with the sport-import car tuners who have had enormous influence on the auto industry (and on youthful trends) in recent years. Neon interior lighting, wake-

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'04 Scion xB.

boomers who need versatile trucklets to haul their petunias and power tools.

Toyota’s first attempt to woo youngsters, the Genesis Project, included three vehicles: the dowdy Echo subcompact; the edgy Celica sporty coupe (whose time in the spotlight lasted about as long as William Hung’s singing career) and the MR2 Spyder, a roadster that was pricey and, lacking a trunk, impractical. Toyota recently said it was discontinuing the Celica and MR2.

But executives insist that they did their homework with Scion. Jim Press, chief operating officer of Toyota Motor Sales USA, sees Scion as a bridge to new customers.

“We realize that the success of our company is that we grew up with baby boomers,” he said. “A successful company has to reinvent itself and remain relevant to newer generations.” Mr. Press stressed that Toyota wanted to avoid a perception of Scion as “old people trying to make a young person’s car.”

Mr. Farley stressed the need for authenticity. “If you’re going to be a car company” with youth appeal, he said,



'04 Scion xA.

Sizing Up the Scion Lineup

	2004 xA	2004 xB	2005 tC
Body style	5-door hatchback	5-door wagon	3-door hatchback
Wheelbase / length	93.3" / 154.1"	98.4" / 155.3"	106.3" / 174"
Engine ¹	In-line 4, 1.5 liters	In-line 4, 1.5 liters	In-line 4, 2.4 liters
Horsepower / torque	108 / 105 lb. ft.	108 / 105 lb. ft.	160 / 163 lb. ft.
Brakes (front/rear) ²	Disc / drum	Disc / drum	Disc / disc
Air bags	2 front ³	2 front	2 front, 1 knee ³
Fuel economy ⁴	32 / 38 m.p.g.	31 / 35 m.p.g.	22 / 29 m.p.g.
Cargo space ⁵	11.7 / 32.8 cubic feet	21.2 / 43.4 cubic feet	12.8 cubic feet / N.A.
Base price ⁶	\$13,795	\$14,195	\$16,465
Alternatives	Chevrolet Aveo, \$9,995; Hyundai Accent GL hatchback, \$10,539; Kia Rio Cinco, \$11,905; Ford Focus ZX5, \$15,820	Honda Element DX, \$16,590; Hyundai Elantra GT, \$15,389; Chrysler PT Cruiser, \$18,080; Suzuki Aerio SX, \$15,999	Saturn Ion Quad Coupe, \$15,300; Ford Focus ZX3 SE, \$15,050; Honda Civic LX coupe, \$15,650; Hyundai Tiburon, \$17,539

All are front-drive models with a choice of 5-speed manual or 4-speed automatic transmissions. xA and xB are low-emissions vehicles; tC is an ultra-low-emissions vehicle. ¹All are dual-cam engines with variable valve timing. ²Antilock brakes standard on all models. ³Front-seat side air bags and side window curtains are options on xA and tC. ⁴E.P.A. city/highway with manual transmission. ⁵With back seat raised / lowered. ⁶Including delivery charge.

As Authentic as ‘The Matrix’ or Menudo

By PHIL PATTON

SCION is less about designing cars than designing a brand, one aimed at the “youths” of Generation Y. The division’s very logo suggests a tendency to try too hard: an ambiguous fin-claw-tooth shape that seems derived from surfwear logos or team emblems of the defunct XFL.

Scion is building its business on a set of generalizations about Gen Y: that 20-somethings are skeptical, distrustful of marketing, seeking what’s authentic. Young buyers must discover things on their own. Scion’s creed holds, finding products in the marketplace the same way they discover nightclubs that are too hip to have signs on the door.

But that has not stopped Scion from advertising on billboards and television, with spots derived from video games and films like “The Matrix.” Scion sponsors

films and concerts and hands out magazines and music CD’s. Its marketers use the word “viral,” implying that the desire to buy is transmitted by unprotected contact with, say, music from Urb magazine, a branding partner.

They carry out “wild postings,” slapping posters on city walls in defiance of local rules (a strategy also practiced by Fortune 500 companies seeking street cred, like I.B.M., Microsoft and Ford).

Is it working? Brian Bolain, national sales promotion manager, says that buyers’ ages form “a camel curve.” That camel is not a dromedary, but a Bactrian with two humps — one at the low end of the age spectrum and one at the high.

As with the Toyota Echo and Honda Element, the low prices that attract young people also appeal to older buyers. The first two xB’s I saw on the East Coast were driven by men with white hair.

Aging boomers or retirees on fixed incomes may not be seeking cool, but are

simply doing their math. The xB offers a lot of interior space for the dollar.

Toyota has long been concerned that its reputation for dependable but unexciting vehicles has given it a stale image among the young, both in Japan and the United States. The company is taking few chances with Scion, especially after a similar Japanese brand-building enterprise, called Will, fell flat.

Much about Scion may seem as calculated as the creation of the Monkees or Menudo, in contrast to the genuine wit and feeling of an operation like Mini. Some Toyota executives seem disdainful; one was spotted wearing earplugs at a high-volume Scion music event.

One other thing Gen Y will discover: Toyota is so committed to ensuring the sales success of Scion that it sneaked a baby Lexus into the lineup at a bargain price. The tC is not only better detailed than any Lexus since the IS 300, it comes in a wonderful palette of subtle colors.

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the-dead stereo systems and stiffer shocks are among the dozens of optional add-ons. Buyers end up with one-of-a-kind cars, and dealers pocket some of the cash that might have gone to aftermarket suppliers.

Yet owners are proving to be demanding, and they have not cut the xA or xB any slack. In the latest initial quality survey by J. D. Power & Associates, the upstart brand placed near the bottom of the rankings — an unfamiliar place for Toyota. The company is looking for the tC, a more substantial car in many ways, to pacify these picky customers.

"The tC is to Scion what the original LS 400 was to Lexus," Mr. Farley said. With its refinement and reasonable price, the LS rewrote the rules for luxury cars. Toyota hopes the tC will attract young buyers who aspire to sporty European cars.

Over all, the styling is a cohesive design that looks solid and expensive. The fenders' strong lines and pronounced wheel openings suggest recent Audis. The headlamps and kink in the rear roof pillar are BMW-esque, and the hood's shape brings to mind either Volvo or Lexus's own IS 300 sport sedan.

The tC that I tested was a classy dark blue with stylish alloy wheels. My hunch that the car's subtle good looks would go unnoticed was proved wrong the first time I parked in my Brooklyn neighborhood. A few tough-looking young men stopped their basketball game to say they thought the car was pretty cool. Mired in Holland Tunnel traffic the next day, a truck driver shouted across the din that the tC looked sharp.

The interior is nicely thought out and well put together, though the expanses of black plastic won't fool you into thinking this is a Bentley. Yet the fit and finish are better than that of many cars costing twice as much.

The nicely sculptured instrument panel has a cover that conceals the radio faceplate — a nice touch for the larcenous city. Silver-face gauges are easy to read, and it's easy to get comfortable with the chunky steering wheel and well-placed pedals.

Whoever designed the dead pedal — a sort of left-side footrest — deserves a raise. Perfectly placed, it is the best I have experienced. The damping of the controls and soft finishes on often-touched surfaces show that a great deal of attention went into getting the interior just right.

My test car's entertaining touches included a shift knob shaped like a microphone, blue neon interior lighting and illuminated cup holders. My partner and I, both in our mid-20's, bought a bottle of water just to watch it mysteriously glow. (No, we don't get out much.) And while the neon illumination borders on tacky, it proved convenient when we dropped toll money on the floor at night.

The standard twin sunroofs prompted one complaint. Although the glass panels give the cabin an airy feel, the blinds covering them are thin, and the material looks like the pull shades in a dorm room.

Other quibbles include an optional subwoofer that eats up a large amount of the trunk (though it improves the audio) and air-conditioning that barely kept up with the 90-degree heat during a weekend drive.

During this trip I discovered how roomy the tC can be. Things can get

awfully cozy when four people travel in an economy coupe, but the tC had room to spare and lots of cubbies to store the detritus of modern life.

Loosely based on the front-drive Toyota Avensis sedan sold overseas, the tC's European breeding shines through. The car proved adept on highways and city streets. The steering is communicative, growing heavier at highway speeds.

Engine power is linear; the 160 horsepower was not overwhelming, but quite capable. The 2.4-liter 4-cylinder engine even makes a nice little growl. (A hot supercharged version is also planned.)

The precise shift action of the five-speed manual, and the clutch's smooth operation, might sway some Gen Y-ers to shift for themselves. (A four-speed automatic is optional.) The mileage rating with the manual is 22 m.p.g. in town and 29 on the highway.

Down the road, Scion plans to keep its lineup fresh by replacing vehicles with entirely new models, rather than refining the same idea year after year. The biggest challenge will be maintaining the brand's underground appeal if 2005 sales reach Toyota's projection of 100,000 plus.

The xB and xA proved that Scion could think outside the box, even inside a box. The tC takes the idea a step further in refinement and style while adding more driving pleasure to the equation. Scion might be a wild child, but the tC proves that the brand is keeping up its grades.

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INSIDE TRACK: Two's a pair, three's a posse.

Honda Leaves the Import-Tuner Door Ajar

MORE than a decade ago, Honda inadvertently created the import car-tuning scene with its inexpensive, durable and easy-to-customize Civic. Starting in California, car-crazy young people transformed these unassuming economy cars into street-legal, fire-spitting racers — or, alternately, into showcases for flashy lighting and thunderous audio systems.

But as the Civic has grown up, it has also grown out. The current generation is larger and more expensive, and has begun to lose the affection of the tuners who originally gave Honda its street cred.

"The new Civic has been fairly re-

jected by the tuning crowd," said Scott Oldham, editor of Sport Compact Car magazine. He said cost-cutting measures, including a new front suspension, took away the car's sporty edge, giving the once-hot Honda a decidedly milder flavor.

Meanwhile, the competition has piled into the segment with their own tuner-friendly models.

"Almost every car company now has a good car geared for the youth market," Mr. Oldham said. Subaru, Mitsubishi and Dodge have grabbed the hearts of young gearheads with wild turbocharged sedans. Now, Toyota is betting that its Scion line will win its own share of the tuner

crowd with clever packaging and a high-quality feel.

Nissan is considering jumping into the fray, too, with its own bold box-on-wheels, the Cube, which is already offered in Japan and may be on American streets within two or three years.

Honda recently said it would introduce a car priced below its Civic, perhaps a variation on the Fit, a tiny "city car" that has been a big hit in Japan.

When this sub-Civic model makes its debut in 2006, it will be a good indicator as to whether Honda's hip tuner image has sped away or is here to stay.

NICK KURCZEWSKI