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Mixed Messages as the Auto Show Season Begins

By NICK KURCZEWSKI

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If the press preview days of this year's Frankfurt International Motor Show proved anything, it is that auto companies need to search high and low to meet car buyers' conflicting demands for more power, luxury and miles per gallon.



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The previews, which offered reporters an advance look at the industry's newest production models and design studies, took place Sept. 12-14, prior to the show's opening to the public. The huge spectacle remains open through Sept. 25.

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Traditionally an opportunity for German automakers to grandstand, this year's press conferences instead featured the newly appointed chiefs of Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz trying to hold their ground amid reports of soft sales, mediocre quality and high production costs.

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Among the vehicles vying to be recognized as the show favorite was the new Mercedes-Benz S-Class luxury sedan, introduced to the press by Dieter Zetsche, still fresh in his new job at the head of Mercedes after the transfer from Chrysler's headquarters in the United States. Driving onto the stage in a red Jeep Wrangler, Mr. Zetsche announced that Mercedes is the "crown jewel" of DaimlerChrysler and assured the crowd that the brand's string of recent recalls was a thing of the past. The new S-Class goes on sale in the United States in early 2006 and is loaded with gee-whiz electronics - the same technology that tarnished the company's reputation for quality.



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"factory tuner" AMG models. The first vehicle to get the 510-horsepower V8 will be the ML63 sport utility.

Mixed messages also abounded at Audi: at the introduction of the Q7, the brand's first S.U.V, a surprise hybrid version was announced. Porsche hitched a ride on the bandwagon too, revealing plans for a hybrid Cayenne S.U.V. - with the head-scratching footnote that it most likely won't be produced before 2010.

Of the dozens of auto companies present, BMW's display may have best summed up the conflicting themes of the show. Its press conference opened with the debut of a station wagon version of the new 3 Series and the 1-Series 130i four-door hatchback. As temperatures rose - Germans are reluctant to use air-conditioning in September - the technology underneath the hybrid version of the X3 small S.U.V. was detailed. The grand finale was the unveiling of a seductive looking Z4 Coupe, a concept car in name only. Based on the current Z4 convertible, the coupe is intended to compete with Porsche's new Cayman.

Volkswagen showed clearer purpose with the new Golf R32 all-wheel drive sport hatchback and Eos convertible with retractable hardtop. Wolfgang Bernhard, the company's new chief executive, acknowledged that the VW brand is in a crisis that can only be solved by slashes in production costs and the release of new models. When it arrives in the United States in mid-2006, the Eos will be positioned above the New Beetle convertible in terms of price and refinement; the 250-horsepower R32 should arrive around the same time.

German brands did not have the spotlight all to themselves, as Dodge presented the production version of the Caliber four-door hatchback that will replace the Neon, a perennial belle of the rental fleet ball. The Caliber will introduce the Dodge brand in Europe, as well as providing the basis for two new budget-minded Jeeps that sat just yards away.

The Jeep Patriot and Compass are meant to capitalize on the brand's rugged image while filling a hole in the model line below the urban-cowboy Wrangler. The Patriot's boxy shape is meant to evoke Jeeps of yesteryear, vehicles that would be more at home on the Rubicon Trail than parked outside a Starbucks. The Compass is intended to attract first-time Jeep customers who prefer carving corners to scaling mountains. Both are expected to enter production in 2006, with the Compass priced around \$15,000 and the Patriot closer to \$20,000.

Ford presented the design theme for its future European vehicles with a coupe-styled concept named Iosis that has four upward-opening doors. The car overshadowed Jaguar's

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new XK coupe, a luxury sports car with an interior like a English gentleman's club but a front view that strongly evokes a Ford Taurus. Even so, the XK's 300 horsepower V-8 and lightweight aluminum construction should give the car catlike reflexes that were lacking in the current model.

With so many cars to see and so many rumors to follow, it was easy to overlook the arrival of Chinese car companies. Vehicles from Landwind, Brilliance Auto and Geely indicated that while the Chinese are coming, they still have a long way to go in terms of quality. Geely was the worst offender, refusing to even unlock the doors of its cars so that journalists could get a view from the cockpit.

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