

A less-glitzy Detroit auto show returns after 3-year absence

September 14 2022, by TOM KRISHER



A Buick Wildcat EV concept is shown during the media previews for the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. This year's auto show will have fewer new model debuts, less-glitzy displays, fewer journalists and possibly lower attendance. Credit: AP Photo/Paul Sancya

When it came time to showcase its electric Chevrolet Equinox SUV to

the public this year, General Motors decided against doing so at the big Detroit auto show, as it typically would have done in the past. Instead, it unveiled the Equinox six days earlier.

GM's decision symbolized just how much smaller this year's auto show will be, with few new model debuts, less-glitzy displays, fewer journalists and possibly lower attendance.

Though the pandemic is partly to blame, larger forces are at play, too: Automakers have figured out that new models can make a bigger splash when they're unveiled to a digital audience on a day where they don't have to share the spotlight with their rivals. Not to mention that making a debut at an auto show can be hugely expensive.

So despite moving the show from January to balmy September and adding outdoor events, the North American International Auto Show won't be the glitzy event it was the last time it was held in chilly January, more than three years ago.

"The industry has changed—the world has changed," said Karl Zimmermann, vice president of the Detroit Auto Dealers Association, which runs the show. "Do I think it's going to be the same as it was before? No. It's a much different format. We're using indoors. We're using outdoors."



Dodge Ram pickup trucks during the media previews for the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. This year's auto show will have fewer new model debuts, less-glitzy displays, fewer journalists and possibly lower attendance. Credit: AP Photo/Paul Sancya

This year's show will be geared more toward consumers and less toward the industry. General Motors and Volkswagen will offer test drives. There will be ride-alongs in new electric vehicles from Ford and others.

"I think that's the likely track of the future—more consumer-focused than industry-focused, because the consumers don't need all the the fanfare," said Jeff Schuster, president of global forecasting for LMC Automotive, a Detroit-area consulting firm. "They can essentially have it look like a showroom."

Gone from Detroit's Huntington Place convention center are the elaborate multi-story displays that cost millions and took months to construct. There won't be any attention-grabbing stunts, like driving cars up steps and through the front doors or an ice rink with figure skaters. Though many automakers, including some from Europe and Asia, decided not to attend, area dealers stepped in to provide cars and displays for their brands.



Jim Morrison, foreground, Head of Jeep Brand North America, introduces the audience to the 2023 Wrangler Willys 4XE at the North American International Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Juarez

Instead of around 50 new model debuts as in past years, there's only one truly new one: The Ford Mustang, to be unveiled Wednesday night at a big outdoor event along the Detroit River. Instead of the usual 5,000 journalists, only about 1,900 received credentials this year. The press conference list has been pared back and supplemented with auto parts makers, EV charging companies and aviation startups.

"We're trying to show the whole gamut of mobility," spokesman Frank Buscemi said.

Zimmerman said it's all part of worldwide trend that started about a decade ago and this year forced the cancellation of the auto show in Geneva, Switzerland. Other auto shows, too, are shifting toward becoming a place for customers in their region to see and even drive what's new.

Even with the changes, the show still amounts to a major production. So much so that President Joe Biden, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and other cabinet members will attend.



A Ford Bronco gives a test drive during the media previews for the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. This year's auto show will have fewer new model debuts, less-glitzy displays, fewer journalists and possibly lower attendance. Credit: AP Photo/Paul Sancya

Biden, a gearhead who owns a 1967 Chevrolet Corvette Stingray, sat in a high-performance Corvette when he toured the show floor Wednesday. He also slowly drove a Cadillac Lyriq electric SUV down an aisle in the convention hall.

The president is expected to tout his new new climate, tax and healthcare law that offers tax incentives of up to \$7,500 toward the purchase of an electric vehicle. Whether Biden will get behind the wheel of a snazzy new car, as he has done during past visits to Detroit, remains to be seen.

The show won't be entirely devoid of glitz. Ford, Jeep and Stellantis' Ram brand have built displays that will hold vehicles as they drive over steep slopes. Dirt and trees were trucked in for a natural look. There will be tracks where customers can ride in new electric vehicles, including Ford's F-150 Lightning pickup. Outside, there's a 60-foot-tall inflatable rubber duck, paying homage to a Jeep tradition of enthusiasts leaving a small yellow duck on a Jeep they think is cool.



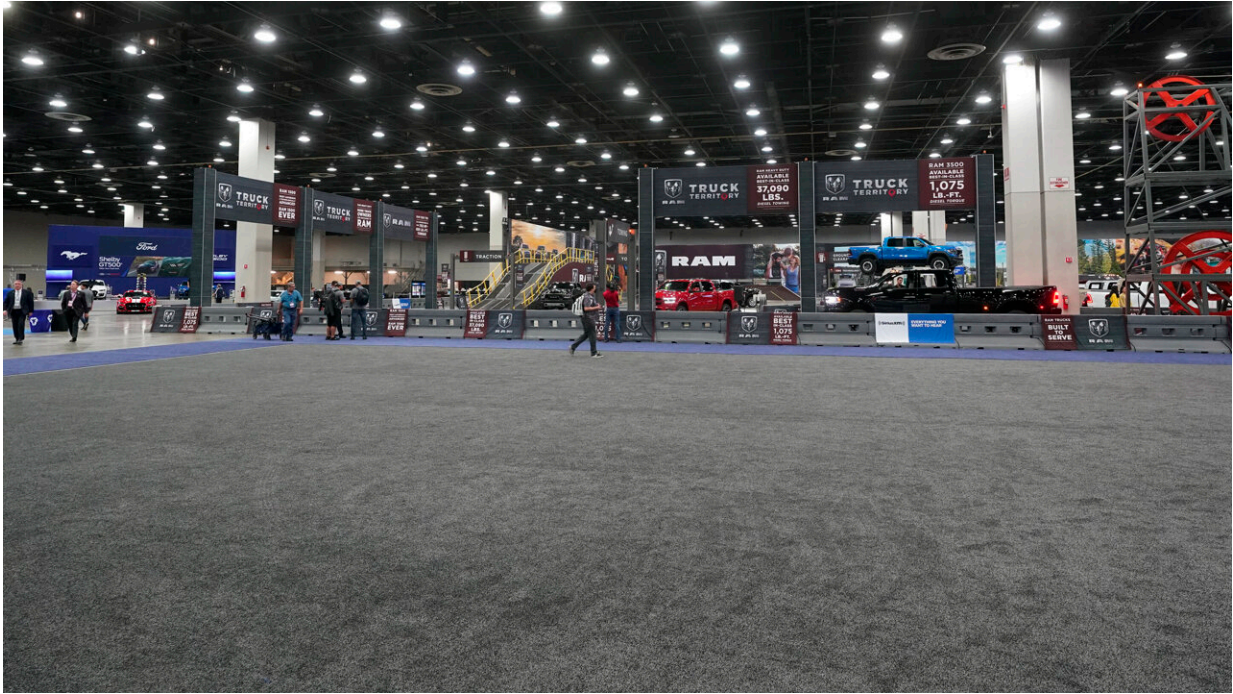
Jim Morrison, Head of Jeep Brand North America, introduces the audience to the Jeep Grand Cherokee 4XE 30th Anniversary Edition at the North American International Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Juarez



From left, Christian Meunier, Jeep Brand CEO, Carlos Tavares, Stellantis CEO, and Jim Morrison, Head of Jeep Brand North America, stand next to the Jeep Grand Cherokee 4XE 30th Anniversary Edition at the North American International Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Juarez



Workers set up for the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Wednesday, Sept. 7, 2022. The show will be smaller with few new model debuts, less-glitzy displays, fewer journalists and lower attendance than past years.
Credit: AP Photo/Paul Sancya



A section of the floor is shown during the media previews for the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022. This year's auto show will have fewer new model debuts, less-glitzy displays, fewer journalists and possibly lower attendance. Credit: AP Photo/Paul Sancya



Workers set up for the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, Wednesday, Sept. 7, 2022. The show will be smaller with few new model debuts, less-glitzy displays, fewer journalists and lower attendance than past years. Credit: AP Photo/Paul Sancya



President Joe Biden sits in a Corvette during a tour of the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Joe Biden listens as Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, left, speaks during a tour at the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Ray Curry, President of the United Auto Workers, second from right, listens. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Joe Biden listens during a tour at the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, Bill Ford, executive chairman of Ford Motor Company, Biden and Ray Curry, President of the United Auto Workers. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Joe Biden listens during a tour at the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. From left, Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, Biden, Ray Curry, President of the United Auto Workers, obscured, Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., and Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Joe Biden listens during a tour at the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. From left, Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, Biden, Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Mich., Ray Curry, President of the United Auto Workers, and Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Joe Biden listens as Bill Ford, executive chairman of Ford Motor Company, speaks during a tour at the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is at left. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Joe Biden speaks with Carlos Tavares, CEO of Stellantis, during a tour at the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Joe Biden speaks with Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, and Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., right, during a tour at the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci



President Joe Biden speaks with Carlos Tavares, CEO of Stellantis, during a tour at the Detroit Auto Show, Wednesday, Sept. 14, 2022, in Detroit. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci

Zimmermann agreed that attendance will likely be smaller than the roughly 800,000 the show drew during peak years of the past. He said he would be pleased with 500,000 for the 12-day show. This year, those who attend outdoor activities alone won't be counted, which will hold down the total.

One thing is sure: Electric vehicles will be big draws for the public. Many will be on display for the first time to customers even though automakers unveiled them earlier.

"They want to know how they ride, how they drive and have experience with them," Zimmermann said. "It's not just enough to see a car on a carpet or to see just a digital display on a screen, but to really interact with the vehicle."

It's the interaction, with vehicles and with other people, that Zimmermann says will enhance the show after the lengthy pandemic pause.

"We like to think that after 3 1/2 years away, we'll do nothing but grow," he said.

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