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SEMA Goes Global With Product Innovations

By Michael Bettencourt
ForbesAutos.com

LAS VEGAS — Like the auto industry that feeds the aftermarket its rolling tabulae rasae, this year's SEMA show proved that the specialty equipment trade is increasingly going global. Honda's status as the featured marque for this year's Specialty Equipment Market Association show was the most prominent sign of shifting international influence for this growing aftermarket industry bonanza.



This Honda Civic Si project car was one of 19 pre-production versions shown at SEMA.

This was the first time in the show's 39-year history that any company outside of Ford, GM or the Chrysler group held that prominent display status. The firm's massive presence at SEMA was all part of Honda's long-range marketing plans for the recently introduced Civic, and the soon to arrive Civic Si.

Honda gave a special advance technical preview of the coupe and Si in the spring to 12 different specialty shops, then later provided them with pre-production versions to work their magic in time for SEMA. This is why a vehicle that doesn't officially go on sale until December had so many fixed-up examples (19, in fact) sitting on the show floor.

There was never any rule against non-U.S. firms claiming that featured marque status, said SEMA spokesman Dan McCue, but it marks a growing interest not only by Asian manufacturers, most of whom were out in force at this year's show, but European as well.

Volkswagen had its first official exhibit there, the first by any European OE (original equipment) manufacturer, showing off modded versions of its new 2006 Jetta and Passat. There have been many Beetles, Jettas and Golfs on display in past years, but all entered by aftermarket companies, or individuals from local car clubs, many of whom join with assorted classic cars, monster trucks, and wacky custom creations in front of the Las Vegas Convention Centre for the duration of the week.

One of the most memorable this year: the jacked-up Hummer H2 with a machine-gun for a hood ornament.

ornaments get.

As fascinating as many of the cars displayed outside were, it was inside the show's halls where the aftermarket's innovation Olympics were taking place, fostered by more than 10,000 booths at this year's event. Of these exhibitors, over 500 of them were new to the show, many of them small firms or shops with major ambitions. Everyone's looking for a competitive edge, and there were a number of products that truly stood out.

The **million-dollar set of wheels** was perhaps the most talked about item at the show. The rims were created by Asanti wheels, with help by gangsta rap legend Master P, who's not only a celebrity fan of the brand's wheels, but also one of the company's best clients. It was Master P's Rolls-Royce Phantom that had two of these 1,100-carat showpieces on display at the show, not counting another one sitting proudly enclosed in a glass display case, proclaiming its throne as the king bling of wheel couture.



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There's likely some haggling room on that price, especially if you already have or don't care for the Bentley GT the firm will throw in with a set of these 22-inch babies.

Mobile electronics giant Sony introduced a new AM/FM/CD/MP3 detachable deck that allows users to download music directly into it, without having to burn CDs or transfer them onto separate MP3 players. The Xplod Giga Panel's detachable face plate has a gigabyte of memory built into it, so that you can connect it directly to a PC via USB, download the music you want, and have it available whenever the deck is in use.

Sure, one gig of memory may not fit your entire MP3 library, and even the 500 songs Sony mentions as the upper capacity limit seems like a stretch. Regardless, it could spell the end of fruitless digging for that CD you burned last year.

Also at the Sony booth, former wrestler-turned-actor Bill Goldberg introduced a new limited-production muscle car by resurrected coachbuilder Baldwin/Motion. It is essentially an all-new recreation of a 1969 Camaro, but with everything enhanced to the extreme: engine, interior, exclusivity. Boasting 700 hp from its 540-inch Merlin Motion engine, its interior gets a full complement of Sony speakers, amplifiers and three screens. With only 12 to be built, the first Baldwin Motion machine in 30 years will start at \$427,000.

One of the smaller booths featuring intriguing technologies was one by JJ Telematics, which offers hands-free car kits for Bluetooth-equipped cell phones. Company rep Steve Rivera said the California-based company offers receivers that simply plug into the cigarette lighter, or another one that can be installed in the dash for a clean look. Once connected, either version will allow you to make or take calls no matter where your phone is in the car, by pushing one button on an included control module, while you keep your hands on the steering wheel the remainder of the time.

One styling trick that rodders have liked for a long time was the shaved door handles, which clean up the lines of a car, but also involved some fairly serious and time-consuming body work, plus a new keyless remote fob.

A Texas company called LaFrance Autoworks is now promising the benefits of the clean look and associated wow factor of pop open doors but much quicker installation times with its Magic Touch system. It removes the door handle, but replaces it with a body-colored touch-sensitive pad that will open the door automatically when the driver touches it, after unlocking the doors with the standard key fob. The company says the conversion process takes 30 to 60 minutes, and avoids broken nails and unhappy significant others.

Then there was a relatively small but noticeable presence for HD Radio, which does not stand for high-definition radio, but essentially improves the sound quality of radio broadcasts, allows for more stations, can receive text messages and eliminates static. The company that licenses the terrestrial-based technology in the U.S. is called iBiquity Digital Corporation, a group made up mainly of large radio broadcasters, so the

Unlike satellite services, HD Radio is free, but it does require a special tuner to receive it. Some examples of the technology were scattered around the show, including in 10 DUB magazine cars. The main issue with the technology is that there are still only about 500 stations broadcasting HD Radio in the U.S., although the company says 2,800 are converting to it now.

The show organizers are also trying to modernize the show itself by increasing its professionalism. For years, the SEMA show has been synonymous with “booth candy” — scantily clad spokesmodels that generate booth traffic and brand name awareness with skintight materials and strategically placed brand logos. Attracting attention is key at a trade show like this, because it only lasts four days, is not open to the public, and is humming with potential buyers, distributors and media coverage that could all have a direct positive influence on their bottom line.

This year SEMA cracked down on the ever-lower necklines and ever-higher — or totally discarded — hemlines. For the first time, the organization issued specific “do not wear” guidelines that prohibited items such as lingerie, bathing suits or thongs from being worn by exhibitors.

“If there are distractions, be it noise standards or overall dynamics of any particular exhibition, then they have to be dealt with,” said SEMA spokesman McCue in a phone interview just before the show closed on Friday. “This is a business environment, not an entertainment venue.”



2005 SEMA spokesmodels

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These guidelines seem to have toned down the skin quotient at this year’s show noticeably, but there is still a significant cheesecake component to the entire affair, and far from 100 percent compliance on these guidelines. This skin quotient makes the show stand out much more so this year, because other international auto shows formerly known for their booth girls, such as the Tokyo and Frankfurt auto shows, have remarkably cleaned up their acts.

It’s a struggle that the show is at least addressing, if not entirely successfully yet. “This is not an industry that is run only by men,” McCue said when asked whether the change was due to pressure from the growing number of manufacturers participating (14 companies this year, compared to only the former Big 3 in 1999).

It still hasn’t attracted all auto manufacturers, with BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Porsche amongst the notable non-attendees this year. The absence of these luxury players is especially surprising when you note all the high-end audio systems, wheels and other accessories aimed at these buyers at the show.

Overall, though, there’s no doubt that SEMA’s reach is growing, in the U.S. and around the world, as McCue points to a record amount of display space and a larger contingent of foreign media in Vegas to cover it. Perhaps the booth girls will always remain part of the show’s fabric, even if not wearing much fabric themselves, but as long as the automotive world’s trendsetters are there, so will the excitement surrounding it.

Photographed by Dave Tainer for ForbesAutos.com.

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