

GM set to bring Volt electric car to Europe

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General Motors is planning to rebadge its Chevrolet Volt electric car as an Opel and bring it to Europe as part of the US carmaker's plans to expand the model range of its highly anticipated new vehicle.

GM is sufficiently encouraged by the development of the Volt that it has begun work on several other similar vehicles.

Bob Boniface, the Volt's design director, said more than two other models were at the scale-model stage of development. The Volt design studio, which employs close to 50 people, is being expanded to cope with the increased work.

One of the follow-up models will be an Opel for sale mainly in Europe. GM is also looking at producing different types of vehicles to the Volt, a mid-sized sedan.

The Detroit carmaker has staked its reputation on the Volt, heavily promoting each stage of the car's development since a concept version was displayed last year. The redesigned production version is due to roll off the assembly line in late 2010.

The Volt and its derivatives will share many components, including a five-foot-long 400lb battery, enabling GM to achieve economies of scale.

Over the past decade carmakers have increasingly used a single platform as the basis for a variety of vehicles as a way of speeding up development and holding down costs.

GM promises that the Volt's lithium-ion battery will have a range of at least 40 miles with a minimum life of 10 years.

The car will be recharged either by plugging it into a normal power socket or, when it is in motion, by a four-cylinder internal combustion engine. Petrol consumption is estimated at about 150 miles per gallon.

Toyota also plans to unveil a plug-in car in 2010. Unlike the Volt, it will be driven both by the battery and the petrol engine. Toyota has said its design will cost far less while delivering almost the same performance.

GM said last week that it would choose the Volt's battery supplier before the end of the year. Two groups led by South Korea's LG Chem and A123Systems of Boston are vying for the contract.

Frank Weber, who heads the Volt project, said the batteries would have enough power. The biggest challenge is maintaining the cells' stability. "Batteries are like human beings, they like room temperature," he said.

GM has yet to disclose the retail price of the Volt but is lobbying for some form of government subsidy to bring the car within reach of the average Chevrolet customer.

Electric vehicles are expected to have limited mass-market appeal in their early years. Robert Bosch, the world's biggest automotive parts supplier, estimates 3m petrol-electric hybrids and between 300,000 and 500,000 electric vehicles will be in operation worldwide by 2015.

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