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Automakers play name game to attract younger, affluent buyers

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By David Kiley, USA TODAY

DETROIT — General Motors is dumping a whole flock of venerable model names the next three years, hoping that new monikers on redesigned vehicles will lure younger, affluent buyers who might have negative impressions of the old names.



GM is shaking up its model lineup, and Chevrolet is dropping some of its brand names.

By Tim Boyle, Getty Images

GM also hopes new names help make the vehicles seem different enough that prices can be higher.

While bad for buyers, that would be a boon for the big automaker. Brutal discounting has eaten so deeply into profits that automakers are almost desperate to find models that sell without incentives.

GM spent an average \$3,827 per vehicle on incentives last month, the most of any car company, according to a report by J.P. Morgan Securities.

"There are a lot of model names that have negative baggage for customers and for GM," says product chief Bob Lutz. In fact, if the renaming effort had begun a bit sooner, "We might have dropped the Malibu name, too," he says, referring to a remake of the car by that name that will be introduced this fall. GM benchmarked Honda Accord and Toyota Camry in developing the car and hopes buyers will regard the 2004 Chevrolet Malibu as a credible rival to imports.

"The important thing is for a name to communicate a relevant message or image to the customers you are after," says Burt Alper, strategist at Catchword, a naming company that coined Dreamery for an ice cream.

What's in, what's out in car names

A look at car names that General Motors is dumping, may dump, is adding or may add.

Out	On the bubble	Future	Maybes
Grand Am Cavalier Park Avenue Century Tracker S10 Seville	DeVille Venture Montana	Cobalt Equinox Colorado Canyon	Journey Juneau Cheyenne XTX Lacrosse

GM's Buick especially needs new names because its lineup is being made over entirely. Replacements for the Park Avenue and LeSabre sedans will get different names.

Rainier, a midsize

Sonoma

Source: USA TODAY research by David Kiley

sport-utility vehicle, will be added this fall, and a sport van is due next year.

By 2006, Regal is likely to be the only remaining Buick name that was in use before 2000.

"These are going to be much more refined than today's models, and we think it would probably take people too long to notice, or give the new products a chance, if we carry over the names," says Buick-Pontiac-GMC chief Roger Adams.

Chevrolet also is due: Colorado pickup replaces S10 this fall. Equinox SUV supplants Tracker next year. Cobalt small car replaces Cavalier in 2005.

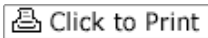
Redesigned Cadillac Seville will become STS. And Pontiac's working on a name to replace Grand Am.

Ford Motor is changing names, too, for reasons similar to GM's.

The longstanding Taurus name, for example, disappears soon, replaced by two models called Five Hundred and Futura — both revived from decades-old Ford models. The Windstar minivan becomes Freestar this fall. "It might take people a year to realize the Windstar was new if we carried over the old name," says Ford COO Nick Scheele.

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