Ford makes effort to return to passenger car business

by Mark_Maynard

I wasn't expecting black leather with white stitching, nor the Pirelli P6 tires - nor the $20,000 sticker price of the 2008 Ford Focus SES test car. But a top-line test car with options is a good way to illustrate the effort that went into the redesign of Ford's smallest car.

FORD FOCUS SES - The exterior and interior of the Ford Focus are new, with engineering enhancements for ride quality. The styling tries to connect some of the design enthusiasm of the midsize Fusion sedan. CNS Courtesy of Ford. Anyone who watches television has probably seen the clever advertisements promoting the Sync music and cell phone actuation. Just press the steering wheel button and speak your desires. It's not just an electronic gadget because it meets state legal requirements for hands-free phone use in the car.

Focus is Ford Motor Co.'s next effort to get back into the passenger car business, though this redo was not a ground-up renovation. The exterior and interior are new with engineering enhancements for ride quality. The styling tries to connect some of the design enthusiasm of the midsize Fusion sedan.

Focus is sold in sedan and coupe body styles in three trim levels.

Pricing starts at $14,695 and $14,995 for the base coupe and sedan, respectively. These are basic transportation cars with crank windows and 15-inch steel wheels. Air conditioning and six air bags are among the standard equipment.

The midrange SE models are $1,000 more and add such features as 16-inch tires and a chrome gill treatment at the trailing edge of the front fenders. It is purely cosmetic but a nice touch.

The top-of-the-line Focus SES comes with Sync (a $395 option on the SE) and has a starting price of $16,695 for the coupe and $16,995 for the sedan.

The focus of Focus seems to be as a high-volume government fleet vehicle, which can't appear too expensive. It is a function-follows-form design with interior roominess, a folding rear seat and a large trunk.

The up-level models add more bright trim, varying textures and access to comfort options. The option to change the mood lighting at the cup holders and in the foot wells is interesting. But I cycled through the seven hues a couple of times, decided on purple and didn't mess with this $295 toy again.

Earrings and lip gloss aren't really enough to make this car a consideration for a mature buyer who prefers the size but wants better seats and more comfort features, such as tilt and telescopic steering or adjustable pedals, which aren't available.

I'm not sure even the equivalent of nose rings, tongue stud and tattoos would be daring enough to draw the edgy, young buyers who are savvy enough to utilize Sync. But it is notable that this feature is offered on an economy car.

Focus has assets. I like that it rides higher than Civics and Scions. There's side-impact safety in a higher seating height, and it is just easier to get in and out of. Sightlines are clear, and the console and controls are intuitive.

There are limitations. A spare tire is a $60 option, and there are no rear head restraints. Traction control is optional, but there is no stability control. The ride quality around town is fine but becomes jumpy on concrete interstate highways. This will be a monotonous ride for the commuter facing a 100-mile round trip. The test car also had a noticeable wind-whirring noise at low speeds that became louder with speed. Maybe it was the alloy-wheel design? But there was other road harshness to be felt and heard, too.

Is this really the car that Ford Chief Executive Officer Alan Mulally would bring home for his wife?

Perhaps, if she is an environmentalist.

Focus is as a carbon-footprint slipper sipper.

Its 132-horsepower, 2.0-liter four-cylinder is the little engine that could. In California and other states with the same emissions standards, this engine qualifies as a Partial Zero Emissions Vehicle, meaning its tailpipe emissions are cleaner than some hybrids.

The EPA's Green Vehicle Guide rates it a 9.5 out of 10 for low air pollution and an 8 for greenhouse gas emissions. Fuel economy with the five-speed manual transmission is 35 mpg on the highway or 33 with the four-speed automatic. Outside of California and the Northeast, the engine is rated 140 hp and gets 24/33 or 24/35 mpg manual/automatic and scores 7/8 for air pollution/greenhouse gases.

For comparison, the Toyota Corolla gets better mileage, 28/37, but scores 7 for air pollution and 9 for greenhouse gases. The Chevy Cobalt scores 9.5 and 8.

The new Focus is an improvement, a good car, but not a car that will poach buyers from Toyota or Honda. At $20,000, there are a lot of other choices - including the Ford Fusion - and competition in this segment is unforgiving. The Honda Civic, for one, has evolved beyond the stage of a "cheap and cheerful" small car to a refined car that appeals to all ages and incomes.

The Focus isn't cheap, but it is cheerful. And Ford could do more to promote it as treading lightly on the

planet.

SPECS - 2008 Ford Focus SES

Body style: Compact, front-wheel-drive sedan or coupe

Engine: aluminum, 132-horsepower, DOHC 2.0-liter Duratec four-cylinder (140 hp in states not requiring California emissions standards)

Transmission: five-speed manual; optional four-speed automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 24 mpg city, 35 highway; 87 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Trunk space: 13.8 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 39.2/41.7/53.5 inches

Length/wheelbase: 175/102.9 inches

Curb weight: 2,642 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: air conditioning, power front-disc and rear-drum brakes, power rack-and-pinion steering, rear defroster, power windows-locks-mirrors, keyless remote, driver information center, single-disc

CD/MP3 audio system with four speakers and audio input jack, two 12-volt power points, 60/40-split rear seat, vanity mirrors, tire inflation kit

Safety features include: dual-stage front air bags, front side-impact bags, side curtain bags; optional four-channel ABS

PRICING

Base: $16,995, including $620 freight charge; price as tested, $20,200

Options on test car: four-speed automatic, $815; heated seats, $115; leather bucket seats, $695; ambient interior lighting, $295; traction control, $185; spare tire, $60; six-disc CD/MP3 Audiophile sound system, $645; Sirius satellite radio, $195

PLUSES: Carbon-footprint slipper sipper; six air bags; roomy interior; manual-transmission models can be flat towed behind an RV.

MINUSES: Still a "cheap and cheerful" small car.

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