

Prodding car makers to sell plug-in electric vehicles STRATEGIC ACTION CAN SEED MARKET FOR 100-MPG AUTO

By Tom Hayse and Jodie van Horn
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Automakers have expressed interest in producing plug-in hybrids but, so far, none has committed to a certain date. Some experts say consumers can prime the pump with "soft orders."

Here's an ad we'd like to see: "Car for sale. Late model PHEV. Zippy acceleration, 100 miles per gallon of gasoline, zero tailpipe emissions for typical daily operation. Matches the driving range of any car on the road today at half the operating cost. Fun to drive, helps secure our nation's energy supply, greatly reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Batteries included."

We would be lining up right now to buy this car, but these plug-in hybrid electric vehicles (PHEVs) aren't yet commercially available. So instead, we are signing up to send the auto manufacturers a clear signal of the strong market demand for this solution.

PHEVs are improved versions of currently available hybrid cars. Conventional hybrids run entirely on gasoline, and mainly use batteries to store energy reclaimed during braking. PHEVs have much larger batteries that can be recharged by plugging in to a standard 120-volt outlet. Fully charged, PHEVs may have a 20-40 mile range of electric-only operation. For a typical 25-mile round trip commute, PHEVs might not use gasoline at all and get recharged every night. Then, come the weekend, they're ready for the 400-mile round-trip to Tahoe, or the 8-hour drive to San Diego, with the same gas-sipping economy of conventional hybrids.

One common misconception about electric vehicles, including PHEVs, is that powering our transportation with electricity is simply moving the pollution and greenhouse gases from one place in the world to another. Not true. The PHEV's super-efficient electric motor running off batteries charged through the grid by power plants results in a large net reduction in pollution of all kinds, including greenhouse gases. Furthermore, less than 3 percent of our nation's electricity supply comes from oil - imported or otherwise. And every year the electric grid gets cleaner and greener with the addition of better plants and more alternatives like solar and wind.

Individuals and agencies around the country have privately converted conventional hybrids to PHEVs to demonstrate the viability of the technology. There are at least four such cars driving on the roads around Silicon Valley. But auto manufacturers aren't yet commercially producing plug-ins. Some have expressed interest in doing so, but have not given a date for when these vehicles will be available in car showrooms.

In an effort to bring mass production closer to reality, the Silicon Valley Leadership Group has joined with Plug-In Bay Area, the local chapter of PlugInPartners.org, a national grass-roots campaign seeking to demonstrate to automakers that there is growing demand for these

vehicles. We are doing so by soliciting "soft" orders for these vehicles from municipalities, government agencies, utilities, businesses and non-profit organizations. A soft order is a statement that the signer will "strongly consider" purchasing a PHEV when it is made available.

ETM, a Newark-based power electronics subsystem company, has placed a soft order with Plug-In Bay Area for 13 cars for its 103 employees. ETM is offering a cash incentive to employees who buy these cars once they are available. We are recruiting individuals and Silicon Valley employers - public, private and non-profit - to do the same.

Employers can help

Here's how employers can help:

Place a "soft" fleet order for your agency/organization/company. If, like ETM, you don't have a company fleet, encourage your employees to place individual "soft" orders and aggregate them.

Institute a cash incentive program for your employees to buy a plug-in hybrid when they become available. Or if you already have a cash incentive program for fuel-efficient vehicles, consider expanding it to include a larger benefit for plug-ins.

Encourage other individuals, companies in your network, local municipalities, utility and non-governmental organizations to join Plug-In Partners.

If everyone plugs into this idea, that car-for-sale ad could soon read: "Sold!"

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