



Is the SEMA Car Show Going Mainstream?

Besides the usual pimp-my-ride accessories, this year's SEMA show will have automakers scouring the aisles for new tech ideas they can tone down and adapt for their new cars.

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Is SEMA going mainstream? For years, this bad boy show was a J.C. Whitney parts catalogue brought to life across a million square feet of convention space: tuner accessories, pimp-my-ride options, chromed wheels, and loud stereos. In recent years, automakers have scoured the aisles for new ideas they could tone down and adapt to new cars. One SEMA theme the automakers may not like this year is the prevalence of excellent portable navigation devices selling for half to a quarter of the \$2,000 they charge for built-ins.

SEMA is the Specialty Equipment Market Association (www.sema.org) and the annual bash runs Tuesday to Friday, Oct. 31-Nov. 3. It's in Las Vegas, of course.

Besides new tech, another thing most all showgoers will be watching is the dress code for booth models, even if that's not how the New York Times will lead off its show coverage. Two years ago things got out of hand, even for Las Vegas, even for SEMA. A leading culprit was the front-and-back-panel dress (no side panels) held together by top-to-bottom side lacing that tended to loosen as the day went by. SEMA cracked down and vendors agreed to a modest dress code. But that was last year.

As for products themselves, expect a flood of high quality PNDs, many with real-time traffic, as well as replacement radios offering navigation features. Many will be around \$500, some as low as \$300, none surpassing \$1,000. Compare that to in-car navigation systems costing \$1,500 to \$2,400, per car. In-car navi is always better, has bigger screens, and is less likely to be stolen, left at home, or be in the car though missing the power cord. But for most consumers, \$500 plus minor hassles for a PND looks pretty good compared to \$1,750 and built-in.

Sony will show a second-generation Nav-U PND, the NV-U71T, which is smaller and offers real-time traffic for \$5 a month atop the system's \$500 street price. Sony's original Nav-U, cost more than competitors but offered few size or features advantages beyond the Sony nameplate. This one features GestureCommand: Draw a carat (^) onscreen with your finger and you can invoke frequently user commands such as "take me home" with simple finger gestures.

New to the navigation market is Panasonic with an in-dash, double-DIN (a standard size) StradaCN-NVD905U video monitor/DVD receiver navigation system with Bluetooth and iPod video, not just audio, connectivity. It connects to either Sirius or XM satellite radio tuners; opt for the Sirius tuner and you can get real-time traffic reports. There's a 30GB hard drive onboard but only for navigation data; not, alas, for ripping music as some others offer.

Who needs a backup-assist feature on their car? Everyone, says Bill Howard.

Delphi's Nav200, just shipping, is an ultra-compact unit with a 3.5-inch display and 1.5GB of map data in flash memory; it's \$350. The Dual NavAtlas XNAV3550 is another nav system with a 3.5-inch display, plus MP3-playing capabilities, and one maybe-neat gimmick: LED turn signals on each side indicating which way to turn. The price seems a bit optimistic, though, at \$800.

For off-roaders, Magellan will show the IPX-4, a sub-\$400 unit that's ruggedized and waterproofed for use in cars, dune buggies, on foot, and even in boats. Magellan also plans to bring out three pocket-size, low-cost nav systems: the RoadMate 2500T, 2200T, and 2000. Alpine has its long-shown (since CES in January), recently-shipping BlackBird PND that can be used standalone or docked in a car and controlled using an Alpine touchscreen car AV system.

The HD Radio alliance, which recently celebrated the 1,000th radio station in the U.S. broadcasting in HD as well as standard analog FM or FM, had two members announce add-on HD tuners that can retrofit existing car audio systems: AAMP of America's Peripheral (that's a brand) and DICE Electronics. Complete replacement HD radios are as little as \$200, but for many cars with proprietary or sealed radio systems, there was no HD path (before these add-ons) other than replacing the car.

In the traditional realm of performance enhancements, but with a high-tech twist, e-Racing Motorsports will conduct a seminar on the benefits of electric supercharging. Rather than using nitrous oxide, an exhaust-driven turbocharger, or a belt-driven supercharge, electric supercharging employs storage batteries (or, soon, giant capacitors) and electric motors to provide extra horsepower. That's essentially what hybrid cars do, but in the name of fuel economy, not necessarily awesome 0-to-60 acceleration runs. Separately, Altair Nanotechnologies will unveil plans for an all-electric sports utility truck.