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Automakers take showrooms to customers

By Bob Golfen

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With truck sales sagging nationwide because of the slowdown in home construction, General Motors is taking its latest truck models to work sites and marketing directly to the people most likely to buy them.

The Hard Days Work Tour is another twist in the latest trend in the highly competitive automotive business: Targeting specific groups of potential customers with events that put the vehicles right in front of them. From taking trucks directly to construction sites to offering test drives at football games, companies are looking for new ways to attract customers.

GM's Work Tour kicked off recently at Arizona State University's new East Valley campus, where about 300 hard hats gathered for a free lunch and a look at the trucks. They also lined up for a free power-tool raffle and certificates worth \$250 toward the purchase of a GM truck.

"Well, it's a great way to get people's attention," said Kevin Davis, a construction worker from Queen Creek.

The Work Tour touts GM's renewed lineup of full-size pickups and work trucks, with a small fleet of them being transported to work sites around the country, giving construction workers, contractors and trades people a chance to check them out and, GM hopes, head out to a local dealer to buy one. About 22,000 workers are expected to see the new trucks, according to GM.

"Most trucks are sold to construction workers," said Rob Minton, a spokesman for GM's truck operations. "A lot use them as personal vehicles as well as work trucks, and we're going after them, too."

The \$250 certificates and tool raffle help GM keep track of how successful the Work Tour has been.

"They get to see the trucks, get a free lunch and leave with a \$250 certificate burning a hole in their pockets," Minton said. "If they take the certificate to a local dealer, we'll know they got it from us."

GM is not the only automaker marketing to contractors and workers, many of whom

have delayed replacing their work vehicles until home construction picks up.

Last year, Toyota launched its redesigned Tundra pickups by taking them to work sites.

"This kind of thing, where you're focused on and targeting a specific group of people who use your products, is really smart," said Brian Moody, senior road-test editor for Edmunds.com. "For the cost of a lunch, you have an audience of people who are specifically in your target demographic."

Light-truck sales were down in 2007 for the domestic brands, dropping about 3 percent through November compared with the same period in 2006, according to Automotive News, an industry newsletter.

November 2007 was down 8.2 percent for the domestics, compared with November 2006.

Sales of Ford's best-selling F-Series pickup sank to 635,520 during the first 11 months of 2007, compared with 725,459 in 2006, a drop of 12.4 percent. Chevrolet's newly redesigned Silverado reached 564,697 in 2007 compared with 583,673 in 2006, losing 3.3 percent.

Overall sales of light trucks, including the import brands, were down 1.7 percent for the first 11 months of 2007, with November seeing a loss of 6.8 percent compared with November 2006.

Moody noted that because work trucks are a necessity for workers and trades people, sales are likely to rise as people buy replacements. Such programs as Work Tour can prompt them to buy one of the trucks they've seen.

"I don't think people are going to stop buying pickups," he said. "It's just becoming increasingly competitive as to whose pickup truck they're going to buy. This kind of targeting could make a big difference."

For hard-working construction crews, the Work Tour allows them to examine the products without using personal time to shop at dealerships.

"A lot of us don't have the time," said Fred Schmidt, a worker from Gilbert. "When we get home, we're tired, and on the week-

end, we have other things to do. Everything's a little more relaxed here, kind of like a tailgate party."

Before arriving at the ASU work site, Work Tour was set up at a Lowe's Home Improvement Center in Mesa to catch construction people as they picked up the day's building supplies.

Efforts to market new cars have become familiar sights at professional sporting events, carnivals or any other function likely to attract large numbers of people who may be in the mood to buy.

Ford and Chrysler have brought test-drive festivals on adjacent weekends to Firebird Raceway in Chandler, where people could try out vehicles.

During the Ford Innovation Drive program, drivers could drag-race Mustang GTs on the Firebird race track and take a four-wheel-drive Explorer over a steep mini mountain that was built for the occasion.

Chrysler set up test tracks for drivers to test out about half a dozen of its latest offerings.

Chevrolet is taking its all-new Malibu to events around the country for people to test-drive, and Ford and Chevrolet both offered test drives of new vehicles during last fall's Arizona International Auto Show.

According to Ford, nearly 10 percent of showgoers who test-drive their products eventually will buy one of them.

Even motorcycle companies have gotten into the act, with a number of them offering test rides during the recent International Motorcycle Show at University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale.

GM is partnering in Work Tour with **Micro Target Media**, an outdoor advertising company that takes mass-marketing messages to crowds gathered at such events as NASCAR races and Ironman competitions. The company, which sets up fencing and portable toilets at events and work sites, uses the temporary setups to mount advertising campaigns.

Many of the workers at the ASU site found out about the Work Tour event from large posters hung inside the portable-toilet enclosures, which were chosen for statistical reasons.

"A construction worker makes 3.2 trips to the john during a work shift," Minton said.