

SEMA 2008: A Chill in the Desert

by John Miller and Doug Waters
Images by D. Massarik and Lee Lichtenstein

The 2008 edition of SEMA Show -- the premier automotive specialty products trade event in the world was a chilling echo of the disarray in the auto industry. The annual Specialty Equipment Market Association Show at the Las Vegas Convention Center, which is not open to the general public, is generally the hottest draw in the Auto industry as far as shows go. Past SEMA Shows have attracted more than 125,000 attendees from the automotive, truck/SUV, and RV markets converging in from over 100 countries in search of new technologies and opportunities. This year, according to SEMA President and CEO Chris Kersting, attracting more than 100,000 attendees was “remarkable under the circumstances of a difficult year”. Difficult indeed. SEMA listed the 2008 exhibitor count at ‘over 1900’, down from the nearly 2100 exhibitors of 2007. As evidenced by the numerous, random gaps and open spaces on the show floor, many exhibitors had cancelled their efforts at the last minute.



Still, the mood throughout was cautiously optimistic. During his keynote address at the opening of the 2008 SEMA Show, Ed Peper, GM-North America vice president of Chevrolet, announced that GM had no reservations about continuing its partnership and collaboration with specialty-equipment manufacturers. As a show of support, GM unveiled several versions of new, not-yet-for-sale 2010 Camaros including an SS version and four concept Camaros—each modified for performance and looks. Attendees were also given the

opportunity at a hands-on measuring session with the new Camaro as an incentive to develop custom/aftermarket parts for the car.

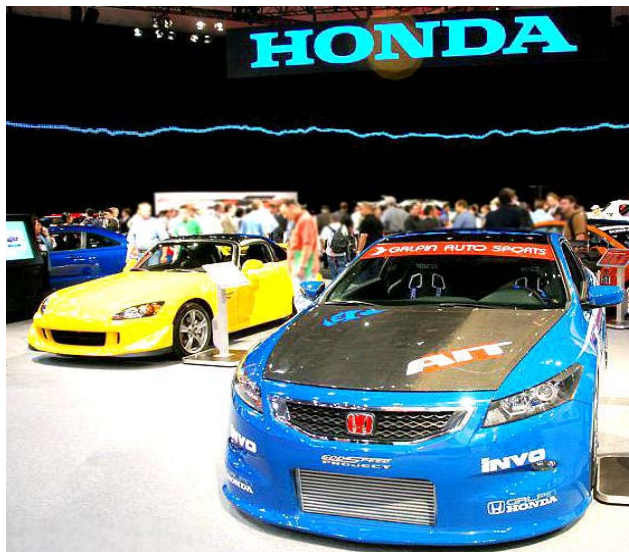
The list of other major Automotive manufactures in attendance was also encouraging, considering the focus of the show is on parts and aftermarket/customizing equipment. Prominent names included, Chrysler, Ford, Honda, Hyundai, KIA, Lexus, Mazda, Mercedes-Benz, Nissan, Scion, Subaru, Toyota, and Volkswagen. And no car show would be complete without a cast of celebrities.



SEMA 2008 offered chances to meet automotive legends such as Carroll Shelby, Richard Petty, and Johnny Rutherford. Not quite as celebrated or well known – Funkmaster Flex (brought in by Ford to hype the ...what else, Ford Flex), the cast of the MTV show ‘Pimp my Ride’ and in a strange twist, Rap artist 50 cent chose not to show up in person, but instead sent a ‘representative’ --- his heavily modified Pontiac G8 that appeared on the Unique Whips TV show.

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Honda America chose the SEMA show to introduced a 2009 Fit equipped with MUGEN accessories and announced that beginning in spring 2009, it will make a complete new line of MUGEN accessories available through authorized Honda dealers. Honda also introduced a slew of radically enhanced street cars including a Civic Honda Factory Performance (HFP) Concept sedan. Noting consumer concern over spiraling fuel prices, Honda is looking at aftermarket performance changes that won't substantially impact fuel economy.



SEMA vice president of vehicle technology John Waraniak echoed those sentiments: "The SEMA Show continues to prove that it is the birthplace of American customization and creativity".

Many of the exhibitors found an upside in the shows reduced attendance---reduced crowd sizes meant less hassle in getting around the show and the city, and those that were in attendance were serious about buying or selling their products. Two show-goers were overheard in conversations about the show that captured the mood of the 2008 event and the expectations for 2009 SEMA show. Regarding the 2008 show, one remarked: "Where are the boothbabes?". SEMA has historically offered one of, if not THE most impressive collection of eye candy ever to roam a show floor. Models and show girls from around the world would pour into Las Vegas each year knowing the odds were quite high in landing a temporary gig for the week. SEMA 2008 was a disappointment in that respect. Many of the exhibitors choose to put their money into their products



and some considered it fortunate to have the funds to exhibit at all, let alone hiring 'eye-candy'. Another show attendee offered a remark that held promise for SEMA 2009: "Doesn't matter... Chevy or SMART, Ford or Ferrari, Toyota or Tata...no matter what they build, the aftermarket guys will always find ways to make those cars go faster, handle better and look superior".

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