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IS THERE A FIAT IN YOUR FUTURE?

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In the early 1940s the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson introduced Ford Motor Company's first slogan: "There's a Ford in Your Future." The slogan was a huge success.

The new venture bringing Chrysler and Fiat together promotes us to ask "Is There a Fiat in Your Future?"

Fiat's reputation in the United States is based on its experience in producing small cars. That experience has not been entirely favorable. For years Fiat's tiny and inexpensive car was produced in Poland through a licensing agreement. From personal experience, I can tell you that an adult could sit in the back seat only by wrapping his hands around his knees in order to pull them back from the seat in front. The car's reputation was only a notch above what the Poles sneeringly referred to as the Soviet-built "Russian Rocket."

So why is Chrysler trying to dig itself out of a deep financial hole by tying its future to Fiat?

One reason is management. Sergio Marchionne the new head of Fiat has turned around the company which like Chrysler had been bleeding cash for some time. If there is anything that Chrysler desperately needs is a huge turnaround.

Another reason is that Chrysler heretofore has not been successful in penetrating the European market with its products. Fiat may help it establish that presence.

A third reason is that Fiat has the lowest average CO² emissions among the ten best-selling auto manufacturers in Europe including Ford, Toyota, VW, BMW, and Mercedes-Benz.

A fourth is common-sense design. Its Multipla provides additional space inside the passenger compartment without making the vehicle longer. Fiat made it wider with three across seating front and rear. The middle seat folds down into a table with three extra cupholders. Rear seat leg and headroom and visibility all around are outstanding for a car which measures only four metres in length.

A fifth is Fiat's reputation for attracting the attention of industry insiders. Its Fiat 500, for example, won the 2009 World Car Design of the Year award. In 2000 the Fiat Multipla won *Top Gear* magazine's Car of the Year award.

A sixth reason is engine technology. Fiat's 500 which Chrysler soon-to-resign CEO Robert Nardelli touted in a recent interview is equipped with different engine versions. The 500 is available in the usual diesel-engine and gasoline versions and a gasoline/electric hybrid. Fiat's Start&Stop system automatically shuts off the engine when the car is stopped in traffic or by a traffic signal, reducing harmful emissions, and restarts it when the brake pedal is released or a gear is engaged. And it has just released an all electric-power version.

Its diesel-engine Multipla gets more than 50 mpg. Further, the Multipla comes equipped with a gasoline-methane (compressed natural gas) engine that has been developed over several model years in which I have personally observed the driver switching from one fuel to the other while in the car is underway simply by pushing a button on the dashboard. No need to worry about finding a station to replenish the CNG. The car runs on gasoline until the driver finds a CNG fueling station. In Italy there is a directory indicating the location of CNG stations.

The technology for retrieving methane from landfills, removing the impurities, and transforming it into a natural-gas equivalent already is available and in use in Louisiana. Consider the possibility of setting up fueling stations at landfills producing a stream of revenues for landfill operators and at the same time reducing CO² emissions?

The cars and trucks most Americans drive operate principally on gasoline and diesel refined from imported oil which transfers wealth from the U.S. to the oil-exporting countries and creates serious air-quality problems especially in congested megacities like Los Angeles, Houston, and Atlanta. Switching to compressed natural gas extracted from landfills reduces methane emissions from those landfills, cuts U.S. dependency on imported oil, and helps improve air quality. Fiat engine technology, already proven in several years use, makes that scenario possible.

Will Chrysler come out of bankruptcy and once again become competitive and profitable? Perhaps the answer to that question depends on the answer to this one: Is there a Fiat in your future?

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