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## Leasing News & Automotive Views

### Ford Transit Connect

Ever since General Motors dropped the Chevy Astro/GMC Safari cargo vans after the 2005 model year, individual tradesmen and companies alike have struggled to find a decent replacement. Their choices were either stripped-out versions of traditional 7-passenger minivans or full-size cargo vans. The minivans were too low and too light-duty for many applica-



tions, and the full-size vans were too expensive, too thirsty, and often too tall for inner-city parking garages and shops. Ford took note and spent the last couple years making the necessary changes to import its successful European cargo van, the Transit Connect. No doubt this will be a success for Ford, especially considering that gasoline is hovering around \$3.00/gallon for most of the country and will likely go up as the economy improves.



**ECONOMICAL:** The Transit Connect is powered by strong 4-cylinder engine mated to a 4-speed automatic transmission. This combination offers fuel economy ratings in the low-mid 20s compared with low-mid teens for a full-size van. Acquisition costs are in the low \$20,000 range which compares well with the competition.

**USEFUL:** Standard across all models are sliding side cargo-doors on both sides, wide-opening rear cargo-doors, automatic transmission, air conditioning, ABS, front & side airbags, and an am/fm stereo with an input jack. Options include power windows, door locks & mirrors, remote start, CD player, Bluetooth, navigation, and various rack, bin and shelving systems for the cargo area. Worth noting is that the Transit Connect is also available as a wagon with a 3-passenger split rear seat that folds flat against the front seats giving operators more flexibility.



**UNIQUE:** Small businesses will appreciate the unique look, attractive styling, and large doors and panels on which to apply company graphics and logos. These definitely turn heads when seen on the roads.

**WHEN?** Transit Connects are already at dealers. Please call us at (415) 474-1100 for details and ordering information.



## Strange automotive landscape

Unless you have a daily blog, anything you write about the current state of the U.S. auto industry will be old news quickly. So rather than try and discuss the specifics of the Chrysler and GM restructuring, suffice to say that what we are witnessing is unprecedented and of a magnitude that is difficult to comprehend. The GM and Chrysler that emerged from their restructuring are shadows of their former selves, especially GM, which will endure the biggest changes. Some were clearly needed and it took a near catastrophe to bring the various parties to the table to



hammer out workable solutions. What we are left with is fewer nameplates, and, maybe more significantly, fewer dealers. There are almost as many GM dealers today as there were 20 years ago when GM owned 40% of the market. Now they will

have 20% (or less) of the market so, according to GM, the number of dealers simply has to drop or they will all go broke. The sad result, however, is fewer jobs and fewer tax dollars for local municipalities. Dealers are usually the top sales tax contributors in any city. Looking ahead, GM's products will continue to be GM products, which is a good thing. Chrysler products will be Chrysler products for the near term, but may have a distinctly Italian flavor down the road as Fiat inserts its engineering and design teams, not to mention actual vehicles, into the mix. Rest assured that today's Fiats are nothing like the cute but unreliable rust buckets of the 1970s. Their products are among the better built, better engineered, and better looking vehicles in Europe. Fiat has already undergone a restructuring and emerged an innovative and healthy automaker. Fiat subsidiaries include Maserati, Ferrari, Lancia, Alfa Romeo and Iveco trucks.



## Sync is way cool

When it comes to beacons of software excellence, Microsoft isn't usually one of the first names on your list. Anyone with a PC understands this. So I was a more than a little skeptical when I started driving a Ford with the Sync system, engineered by Microsoft. Sync is available on most new Fords (and Lincolns & Mercuries) and allows you to



use voice commands to operate your Bluetooth cell phone and your mp3 player (iPod.) Many cars offer integrated iPod controls and fingertip dialing but Sync does both and is brilliant in its simplicity and execution. Starting with your iPod: plug it into Sync using a standard USB cable and after a few seconds it will index your entire library. Just press the Sync button and ask for any song, artist, genre, album, or playlist, and it starts playing. Same with your phone and its address book, only there's no cable needed. It's all done via Bluetooth. Just press the Sync button and say "call Suzy at home" and the Sync lady obliges. Both functions operate hands-free so there is no need to take your eyes off the road. And the voice command functions really work, unlike most of those annoying automated systems we are forced to use on the phone. No complicated programming, no file transfers into the car's computer; it's really very simple and elegant. The fact that it costs only about \$300 is icing on the cake. Ford estimates its cars with Sync are selling at about twice the rate as the same cars without. I believe it.



## Interesting small cars

Americans have historically favored big vehicles with lots of options, and scoffed at small cars as being too small and cheap, and not something to aspire to. Conversely, with high gas prices and dense cities, Europeans adore their well-equipped, cleverly-styled, and economical small cars. With the success of the MINI, however, things are starting to change. Faced with \$4 per gallon gas last year, Americans finally starting looking at smaller alternatives, as long as they featured adequate room, creature comforts, and style. VW and Volvo understand this and offer plenty of luxury options on the economical Jetta and V40. For an entry-level model, the new-for-2010



**Mazda3 sedan** (left) and 5-door offer decidedly upmarket options like dual-zone climate control, Bluetooth, navigation, remote start, trip computer, power heated leather seats with driver memory settings, Homelink garage door opener, Bi-Xenon headlights that swivel, and more. All for about \$25,000.

Fiat recently announced that they will start selling four versions of their terribly cute **Fiat 500** (right) in the States in 2011. There will be two versions of the hatchback, a station wagon and a convertible. They will be built in North America at a Chrysler plant. More along the lines of the trendy MINI than the more mainstream Jetta and Mazda3, the Fiat 500s will appeal to a niche of people willing to pay a premium price for a premium and unique small car.



## Buick vs. Pontiac

Why was Buick saved and not Pontiac? Stand by. Production has just begun on the new **2010 LaCrosse**. Following on the heels of



the successful Enclave crossover, the LaCrosse continues Buick's revival with surprisingly beautiful lines and innovative interior. Here's some interesting trivia for you to try on

your golf buddies: from January through June of this year, 47,000 new Buicks were sold in the US. During the same period, 196,000 were sold in China. Most suspect that's why GM killed the Pontiac brand and not Buick. Consider that Buick has been a very highly regarded nameplate in China since the 1930s and is key to GM's current success there. GM has a dedicated design and engineering studio there which was instrumental in creating the beautiful new 2010 LaCrosse for both markets. Curious and have a minute? Visit [www.buick.com.cn](http://www.buick.com.cn) to see the Chinese web site.



"I think it's wrong that only one company makes the game Monopoly." — Steven Wright

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