Driving Into the Future

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Robert Derby is one of the millions of Americans who drives a sports utility vehicle. Along with small trucks, SUVs are closing in on cars as our country's preferred mode of transportation. No matter that it costs us more to keep filling 'em up. Not only do we like the outdoors four-wheel image, we've decided that when it comes to navigating the dangers of modern freeways, we prefer something a little sturdier.

But Derby is one of those drivers who still longs for better and cleaner gas mileage. And as marketing director for Epyx, he's doing something about it. His company is in the forefront of efforts funded by automobile manufacturers and the Department of Energy to develop a new generation of vehicles. Epyx's specialty is fuel cell technology, a system that converts fuel to hydrogen to make electricity.

"I drive a sports utility vehicle, but I'm really looking forward to the day when I can get 40 miles to the gallon compared to the 20 I'm presently getting," says Derby. "We [the public] will probably like the looks of the fuel cell and electric cars. We'll have the speed and power without the noise."

Epyx, a subsidiary of Arthur D. Little in Cambridge, Mass., worked with the Department of Energy, Plug Power of Latham, N.Y., and the Los Alamos National Laboratory to develop a fuel cell for automobiles. Demonstrated for the first time last fall, the cell is capable of generating electricity from a variety of fuels, including gasoline and natural gas, as well as renewable resources such as ethanol and methanol. Refueling will be as easy as pulling into your present-day gas station.

No one expects overnight change, but it's coming — and in a variety of packages. Car manufacturers already are introducing cars powered by electric batteries. By the early part of the next century, the new fuel cell system will be available: "The public could see this technology on the market as early as 2004," says Steve Chalk of the Department of Energy's Office of Advanced Automotive Technology. "Consumers have to be enticed to change old habits."

Manufacturers already understand some of those enticements. For example, Ford's new electric car is a high-end sports utility vehicle available in California. Cinergy Corporation has designed its electric vehicle in the form of a Formula I race car, attracting attention and demonstrating top performance.

Meanwhile, Ford and Honda are developing a network of public charging stations in California designed to make driving electric vehicles more convenient. The expected development of "fast charging' batteries could make electric vehicle charging as fast as refueling today.

Epyx plans to introduce its new fuel cell technology to the public through small premium power devices for use in vacation homes, sailboats, emergency back-up generators and the like. "Once they discover how efficient and quiet these are with no smell from emissions," says Derby, "I think people will be more receptive to using the technology in cars."

However, there are a lot of us who still want to hear the *vroom* when we put the pedal to the metal. So, Derby agrees, the marketing plan for fuel cell automobiles may have to include an onboard sound system — to emulate our 20th-century gas guzzlers.

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