Smiles abound at NAIAS opening days

BY NATHAN MUELLER
STAFF WRITER

Warren Harris, president and COO of Tata Technologies in Novi, walked away from the Mercedes-Benz press conference Monday afternoon at the North American International Auto Show with an ear-to-ear grin across his face.

Maybe it was pop singer Colbie Caillat's performance that helped put it there, or maybe it was Harris' observation that the atmosphere at the NAIAS is getting back to its roots of being fun again.

"Two years ago, it was a dreadful time and last year there was a confidence we were moving in the right direction," the Birmingham resident said as he stood next to a Dodge Charger on the Cobo Center floor. "But this year we are seeing a lot of positive things happen. The momentum is starting to build."

"It's a great time to be in the auto industry."

Harris was at Monday's press preview with Dan Saad, Royal Oak resident and director of communications for Tata Technologies, which provides engineering and design services to several auto manufacturers.

The company's biggest North American customers are Ford and Chrysler, and Saad said they are "seeing Detroit automakers coming back."

"The difference from last year to this year is remarkable," Saad said. "This was always the biggest party of the year for the auto industry, and the best part is seeing all those smiling faces again."

The resurgences and energy at the show also was prevalent to city of Novi Economic Development Director Ara Topouzian, who attended the second press preview show with Novi City Manager Clay Pearson.

The two volunteered to work the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's "Smarter Living in Michigan" exhibit that includes a feature that allows people to test drive electric-drive and hybrid vehicles on a small track.

Topouzian and Pearson took the Chevrolet Volt and a Smart Car for spins around Town Square.

"The suppliers I have talked to are seeing (the industry) slowly coming back," Topouzian said. "They are seeing a resurgence of work.

The Farmington Hills resident, who said he has been coming to the NAIAS for about eight years, also noted that the vehicles represented at the auto show are much different than the concept cars of the past that rarely hit the roads.

"This represents the current economy we are in," he said, pointing out the focus on electric vehicles and technology improvements. "And that is definitely not a bad thing."

The public will get its first look at the more than 500 vehicles on display at 9 a.m. on Saturday. The show is open from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. from Jan. 15-22, and from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Jan. 23.

Tickets are $12 per person for adults, $6 for seniors 65 and older and $6 for children 7-12 years old. Children 6 and under are free.

For more information about the 2011 North American International Auto Show, visit www.naias.com.

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Sam Slaughter poses by a 2011 Buick Regal GS at the North American International Auto Show on Jan. 11. Slaughter is president of Sellers GMC in Farmington Hills which captured the 2010 Buick Dealer of the Year award.

The Ford Motor Company display at the 2011 North American International Auto Show in Detroit featured lots of bright LED lighting and cool blue tones.

Carl Berry, chief of security for the North American International Auto Show, pauses on the show floor on Jan. 11 during press preview day. Berry, the former chief of police for Plymouth Township and a former patrolman and chief for Plymouth, says that during the show he often works 18-20-hour days.
Ara Topouzian, economic development director for the city of Novi, checks for traffic before zipping around in an electric Smart Car at the MEDC booth. Topouzian, of Farmington Hills, was at the North American International Auto Show on Tuesday.
Johnson Controls' Alex Molinaroli introduces his company's all-electrical ie:3 vehicle at a press conference.

Johnson Controls' Steve Wood explains his company's electrical automotive battery technology at the Jan. 10 auto show in Detroit. The company, which has offices in Plymouth Township, usually known for its seating engineering, is also expanding into battery technologies.
Southfield's Lawrence Tech University had its own exhibit at the auto show. Current junior Marc Basta (left) shows off an electric-hybrid racing car he had a hand in engineering to alum Mike Zulinskis.
U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Michigan, greets an auto show attendee moments before the North American Car and Truck of the Year were awarded at Monday’s press preview.

Visitors to the Jan. 11 press preview check out a BMW model.