

Ford revs up summer incentive season;

Automaker offers cash to those who test-drive one of their models, but buy from a rival manufacturer

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Ford Motor Co. of Canada Ltd. will offer \$100 to shoppers if they test-drive any one of the automaker's vehicles but then buy a rival's product instead.

Ford said yesterday it is introducing the national promotion tomorrow on a bet that the automaker can increase sales by pulling a lot more potential buyers into showrooms.

It is part of the company's summer incentive program, which will include "employee pricing" and thousands of dollars in savings that Ford and other automakers have offered to consumers in recent years during July and August.

In getting a small jump on the latest summer incentives, Ford president David Mondragon said the company is simply compensating consumers for their time in a company dealership.

"It's a way of introducing our brand and our vehicles," Mondragon added in an interview.

"We're betting on the fact that our vehicles are so good that once you drive a Ford, you won't want to drive anything else."

He said Ford's research shows that once shoppers visit its dealerships, the company's sales success rate is 30 per cent and that it should increase this summer with the latest incentive.

Under the promotion, shoppers will receive \$100 if they test-drive any new Ford or Lincoln and then purchase a model in the same segment from another manufacturer.

The promotion is a bigger version of a Ford idea that the company and some dealers have offered on a particular model in recent years.

In 2004, Ford gave visitors at the Canadian International Auto Show a coupon to test-drive the Freestar minivan. Coupon holders who drove the model got \$100 if they bought a rival minivan.

In 2006, a Ford dealership in Mississauga offered \$100 gift cards to anyone who test drove a Fusion model and then bought a competing Honda, Toyota, or Nissan mid-size car.

Ford is also offering consumers the same lower prices that employees can get for new vehicles. The savings range from about \$4,300 on a Fusion car to \$15,000 on a F350 Crew Cab pickup truck.

General Motors and Chrysler spokespersons would not disclose any new incentives for July and August.

However several automakers including GM, Ford, Hyundai and Mazda are currently offering cash incentives or no-interest financing.

Meanwhile, Mondragon said he will meet with Environment Minister Jim Prentice again soon to press for "clunker" legislation in Canada that would spur slumping auto sales by encouraging consumers to scrap aging vehicles in exchange for incentives of at least \$3,500 to buy new, more fuel-efficient models.