

Ford Aftermarket Team Works Year Round to Make Blue Oval Shine

By Chris Rahi Kassab

Vehicle customization is a \$36 billion industry and growing, as more and more people look for ways to personalize the appearance, performance and functionality of their cars and trucks.

Vehicle Personalization, Global Brand Licensing, Ford Component Sales and Ford Performance all sell Ford accessories, and a small but nimble team in Global Product Plan Strategy works year round orchestrating the selection, development and display of customized “project vehicles” that Ford presents at the annual Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) show in Las Vegas.

“We’re out there polishing the Blue Oval every day, strengthening Ford’s position in the aftermarket,” said Sherry Kollien, who leads the team. “There is a wide range of modifications on display at SEMA, and it’s our job to show the bandwidth of what can be done with our vehicles.”

Determining which aftermarket companies are selected to receive project vehicles and show their wares at SEMA is an intricate process.

“We look at the big picture and select our aftermarket partners very carefully. What is their vision for the vehicle? What are the functional changes they’re making to the car? Will they create new accessories? What are their marketing plans for the car?” explained Kollien. “We also research the companies and review their past work to ensure their credibility.”

Not only do the project vehicles present an opportunity for Ford to shine at the SEMA show, they also provide inspiration for potential Ford customers.

“If someone can buy a part to improve the performance of their Mustang, for example, it makes the vehicle a lot more attractive and desirable and it may influence a future purchase,” said Kollien.

Filip Trojanek, managing partner, CorteX Racing, customized a 2015 Mustang for the 2014 SEMA show. He is now selling the custom louvered hood and

suspension parts he displayed at SEMA on his website and is in talks to retail some of the accessories through Ford Performance as well.

“Mustang is probably one of the most customized vehicles in the U.S. right now and consumers really love to see new ways to personalize it because not everyone has the ultimate vision on their own,” he said. “With this program, Ford gathers some of the best ideas and then provides the means for us to make the car a reality. When people see all these unique vehicles it inspires them to want to get a Mustang and buy parts for it.”

When CorteX Racing was selected to receive the 2015 Mustang as a project vehicle, the car hadn’t yet been released. Through a Ford program called the Technology Transfer Initiative, Ford shares the vehicle CAD data with aftermarket partners early on to ensure that all the parts they make fit and work properly.

“Years ago if someone wanted to make a product for a Mustang they’d literally buy a car and do reverse engineering on it and it would be full of fit problems and functional issues,” said Mike Nicopolis, a member of Ford’s aftermarket support group. “By sharing the CAD data, these companies can now do forward engineering and validate the parts, assuring the right quality and fit and reducing the cost of product development. Then when the vehicle arrives at dealerships customers can get aftermarket parts that are already available.”

Regardless of whether the accessories are sold through Ford or via an aftermarket supplier, Nicopolis said Ford benefits.

“We’re a company that makes production cars. That’s our main mission,” he said. “Showcasing our vehicles through the SEMA program helps us create buzz for our vehicle portfolio. It also serves as a litmus test for future programs to see how different products and accessories are received by the customers.”

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