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CUVs turn yesteryear's station wagon into bigger niche in 2012



**“AS MORE COMPANIES SEE GROWTH IN THIS [CUV] SEGMENT, THEY WILL JUMP ON BOARD AND OFFER ACCESSORIES, GIVING THE END CONSUMER A CHOICE OF COMPANIES.**

The downside to the growth in this market segment is that the OEs catch on and make the products available from the factory, thus cutting into the aftermarket sales.”

— KATHY KNAUTZ  
OWENS PRODUCTS

*The crossover niche appears to be poised to take a slightly bigger share of the new vehicle market this year — and with it, a potentially bigger share of the restyling aftermarket.*

By Phil Sasso

As you probably know, crossovers are basically a sport utility built on a car frame, or as one 23-year aftermarket veteran says, “It’s what we used to call a station wagon.”

As consumers are downsizing vehicles, automakers seem to be following their lead. It seems crossovers (CUVs) are becoming the new SUV. But, even with all the downsizing, CUVs seem to be growing up. Subaru’s once more-compact Forrester has gotten bigger for example, and the Outback wagon seems to be trending more toward an SUV look and feel. So, as the number of vehicles in this niche grows, the size of the crossovers seems to be growing in size, too.

We asked several aftermarket ex-

perts to share their thoughts on where this trend is leading buying patterns and the aftermarket in particular. (See “Our Sources” sidebar for more on these experts.)

**WHAT’S YOUR TAKE ON THE 2012 CROSSOVERS AND THE AFTERMARKET’S EXTERIOR BODY PRODUCT SELECTION?**

**Rick Nauman, ATS Design, Cerritos, Calif.:** The 2012 crossovers are definitely moving in the right direction and appealing to more people. Aftermarket exterior accessories will be highly in demand as consumers purchase the lower level models and customize them with the products they want.

**Kathy Knautz, Owens Products, Sturgis, Mich.:** CUV is the new buzzword in the automotive aftermarket because consumers are seeking out modes of transportation with improved gas mileage.

The U.S. market is not willing to give up the comfort and usefulness of the



**Facing Page** Delta Tech's Bogdan Durian's first aftermarket purchase for his 2003 Murano (2009 model pictured) was a roof rack. "In a crossover you want anything that gives you more space, like a rack," he says.

**Top & Center** The U.S. market is not willing to give up the comfort and usefulness of the SUV, says Owens Products' Kathy Knautz, which has led to larger CUVs such as GMC's Terrain and Nissan's Rogue.

SUV, which has led to larger CUVs. The CUV owners formerly drove light pickups and SUVs and have the desire to personalize their ride.

The automotive aftermarket responded to this growing market segment by creating a plethora of exterior accessories. Owens Products started developing running boards for CUVs in 2007. Other companies manufacture and sell wind deflectors, hood shields, hood scoops, grilles, tube steps and grille guards, mud flaps, lighting, graphics, roof racks, hitches, body restyling kits and chrome dress-up kits for CUVs.

**Bogdan Durian, Delta Tech Industries, Ontario, Calif.:** Actually, I was an owner of one of the first crossovers back in 2003 when the [Nissan] Murano came out — I still have the car. In my mind, it was one of the first experimental crossovers. So, I personally watched the trend coming.

This was a trend that really started in Europe, basically. People were looking for the convenience of packing the whole family and the dog into the vehicle, like they did in an SUV. With gas prices trending upward though, there was a need for downsizing, and I think the crossover was the answer.

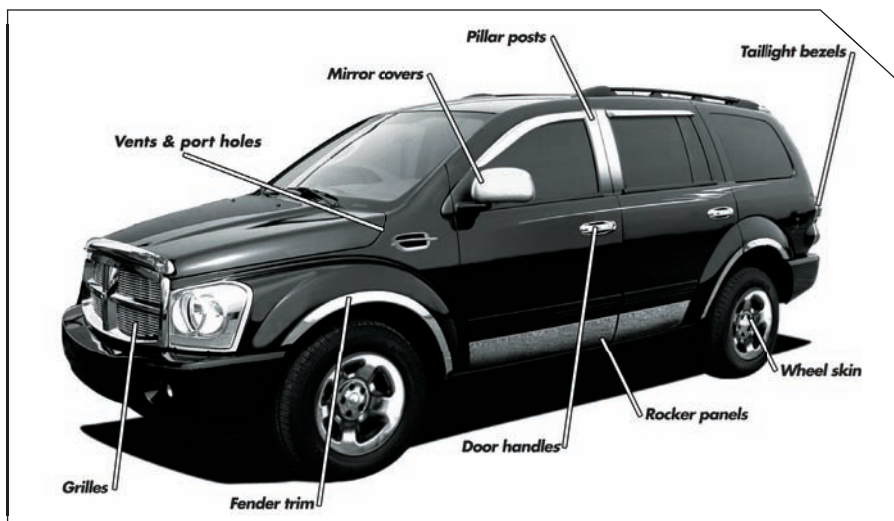
But, in order to accommodate most people you have to make enough room to take all your stuff around, like your camping gear or whatever. That makes having a rack on your roof a necessity. And I have one on

Perrycraft's Dan Epting says he suspects that crossovers "will have steps — specifically, step tubes or molded fiberglass steps. Probably more ground effects kits — you know, dressing up the bottom edge of the vehicle, making it look more aerodynamic, will be the direction. But, I think you'll see more molded running boards than nerf bars and tube steps. Photo of molded running board on a Toyota Sienna van from ATS.



**Top Left** Products, such as window vent visors, are typical of add-ons for CUVs, such as Subaru's Forrester. Photo from C&C CarWorx.

**Lower Left** Lane Carter of Restylers' Choice says, "More accessories such as chrome door handle covers, chrome mirror backs, stainless steel pillar post moldings, painted body side moldings and vehicle-specific graphics will be available as the sales of these vehicles gain market share."



looking for newer accessories than the aftermarket has been offering in the past.

The OEMs have taken many of the traditional aftermarket accessories and added them to their own line of what were aftermarket-only accessories. If we do not change/evolve, we will become the dinosaurs of the past.

We need to look at new designs and technologies to provide exciting new looks and useful accessories. In the past, you could add a mediocre fog/driving lamp to a vehicle and it was accepted because it looked good. Today, that light must add true vision improvement, and look integrated into the vehicle. Buyers are more aware, so we must keep up.

my Murano ... that's the first thing I got.

In the lighting business, we are mostly concerned with appealing to soccer moms and family people. That brings with it children and, maybe, some pets. So, safety becomes an important feature. ... We create lighting like retrofitting daylight running lights into fog lights to cover more road, and side lighting to make your vehicle safer.

**Lane Carter, Restylers' Choice**, Cincinnati: As these vehicles become more popular and more are sold, the manufacturers will fill the pipelines with a variety of exterior parts.

**Dan Epting, Perrycraft**, Winston-Salem, N.C.: It's actually a trend that started quite a while back. ... A few years ago I said [in response to a customer]: "Cross-

over? ... I'm telling my age now, but that's what we used to call a station wagon." It's kind of come full circle now with a crossover being a downsized version of something like a Suburban. A Ford Flex is, in my mind, a dead ringer for an old-fashioned station wagon.

Traditionally, we made a lot of larger rack units for Suburban, Tahoe, Yukon, minivans, stuff like that. When the gas prices shot up in 2009, we saw a definite decrease in the large rack units — and an increase in the small vehicle sales like Nissan's Versa, Murano and Rogue, vehicles like that. I'm talking a 30% increase in our smaller-vehicle racks. So, we've seen a definite change.

**Stephen Carl, C&C CarWorx**, Wappingers Falls, N.Y.: I believe we are dealing with a different customer today,

**What exterior body items do you see becoming more available for 2012 for wagons, CUVs and SUVs? Do you see this market growing?**

**Carl:** After saying we must change, I still feel there is a market and a real need for such things as body side moldings and all the protective items old and new: hood protectors, both traditional, and the newer tape-on parts; door edge guards; and any item that will add protection to someone's investment.

**Knautz:** I see ground effects, rear-window louvers and spoilers becoming more plentiful for the CUVs. As more companies see growth in this segment, they will jump on board and offer accessories, giving the end consumer a choice of companies. The downside to the growth in this market segment is that the OEMs catch on and make the products available from the factory, thus cutting into the aftermarket sales.

**Nauman:** I see aftermarket accessories growing — like LED lights, bumper protectors, body side molding and mud guards.

**Carter:** More accessories such as chrome door handle covers, chrome mirror backs, stainless steel pillar post moldings, painted body side moldings and vehicle-specific graphics will be available as the sales of these vehicles gain market share.

**Durian:** Most people who buy crossovers are not really tricking up their cars. Unfortunately. Their main concern is function and safety. Along with function they want more space. You don't need more space in a Hummer. But in a crossover you want anything that gives you more space, like a rack. I also think we'll see a lot of safety lighting for crossovers.

**Epting:** I think all the same body-type accessories of SUVs will be developed, sold and used. I suspect that crossovers will have steps — specifically, step tubes or molded fiberglass steps. Probably more ground effects kits — you know, dressing up the bottom edge of the vehicle, making it look more aerodynamic, will be the direction. But, I think you'll see more molded running boards than nerf bars and tube steps.

**Larger wagons and SUV styles still may be produced. Will there be as many exterior aftermarket products for these larger or more luxury-minded vehicles? What do you think they'll be?**

**Carter:** The more expensive a vehicle, the less demand for the vehicle because of cost. Manufacturers aren't going to spend the money in R&D unless they believe they can recoup their money in sales. The fewer vehicles sold, the less aftermarket parts that are available. You will probably see fewer vehicle-specific items available and more universal fit items for those vehicles.

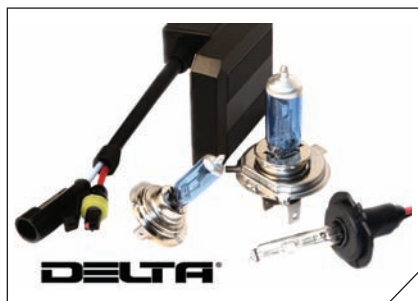
**Nauman:** I don't think there will be many exterior aftermarket products for these larger or luxury-minded vehicles; the automakers are preloading most of them, so consumers don't have to add products, and can justify the high cost of these vehicles.

**Durian:** The trend will continue. Everybody is going into it including the luxury cars. You see Mercedes, BMW, even Porsche. Manufacturers that would never touch any traditional station wagon business are going into crossover because it's more classy, more sporty and you have all the amenities inside. It's a good trend and it will continue.

**Epting:** To me, there's always going to be a market for the larger vehicles. That market will expand and contract based on certain economic conditions, cost of fuel and things like that, because in some households things can get pretty tight. But then you have the people who've got plenty of money and they've got that Suburban or a two-ton pickup truck because their hobby is horses and they pull a horse trailer. You can't pull a horse trailer with a Nissan Rogue. So you have a certain segment that I think will always be there. It's just going to ebb and flow depending on what the economy's doing.

**Carl:** There will always be a need for larger vehicles. In our industry, like many, it seems "old" is "new" again. Large push-and-brush grille guards will fade for a while, then come back. We will see new designs in running boards, side steps, and nerf bars. Lighting will always be added to vehicles. And comfort/convenience items will do well.

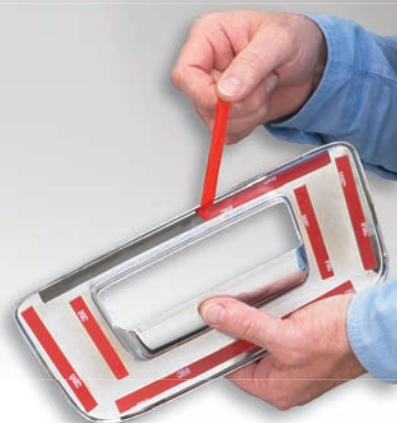
The tech add-on parts will have to be integrated, and will have to make the OE equipment better. We used to replace radios to make better sound sys-



In the past, says Stephen Carl, "you could add a mediocre fog/driving lamp to a vehicle and it was accepted because it looked good. Today, that light must add true vision improvement, and look integrated into the vehicle. Buyers are more aware, so we must keep up." Photo from Delta Tech.



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tems; now we will need to improve the functional qualities of those systems to make a place for ourselves in the market.

**Knautz:** Aftermarket accessories will absolutely be available for the larger, luxury-minded vehicles. The chrome trim kits, wind deflectors, running boards, hitches should be popular. The aftermarket will provide any needed accessory that does not come as standard factory equipment on the vehicles, as the luxury vehicles tend to be offered more dressed up.

**What's your best guess as to whether exterior aftermarket accessories will be stronger in 2012? Will 2012 be better or worse or mirror 2011?**

**Carter:** I believe 2012 will be a growth year for the industry.

**Knautz:** After the disastrous 2008-2009 market decline, the automotive after-

market is experiencing slow but steady growth. I believe this trend will continue and 2012 will realize increased sales over 2011. The popular aftermarket products will depend on what is available as standard equipment and what is not. Entry steps, wind deflectors and hitches will remain in demand.

**Carl:** We all hope 2012 will improve. I hate to admit it; however, I've lived through several recessions, and the car business is one of the worst places to be in a recession. But it will get better. People always want to be individuals. As long as we strive to be individuals, the accessory business will be alive and well.

I think the industry has to do a better job letting the public know what's available for their vehicles. We do a fairly good job marketing to enthusiasts, but the general public has no idea that they can add items to their vehicles they'd like to have. I have

people saying they didn't know they could add things as simple as painted body side moldings or more integrated items such as navigation or backup cameras.

In all the years the aftermarket has sold accessories, we have only scratched the surface of available customers. Trade organizations should focus on advertising in places other than to the trade or specialty magazines. We should show people what they can do to their vehicle. I'm not talking about a show car or an over-the-top performance vehicle, but their everyday car. There are a lot of customers that would love to have our accessories on their new vehicles. It's too bad we keep them such a secret.

**Epting:** My gut feeling is [2012] will be about the same as 2011 was. I have nothing to hang that on, that's just gut based on the current economic and political conditions — mostly, the political cli-

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mate. My guess is we'll see plus or minus 3% over 2011. If it goes up to 8% or 10% over 2011, I'd be tickled.

In something like the rack business, it also depends on how many vehicles auto manufacturers put out that already have a rack on it.

**Nauman:** I'm sure anyone you ask that attended the 2011 SEMA Show would agree that 2012 will be better and stronger than 2011. The show was the busiest we've seen in years, and walking through the South Hall [pickup accessories] you saw several new companies displaying.

**Durian:** SEMA this year, in my estimation, was twice as strong as last year as far as traffic and the seriousness of the business. It was a very significant improvement over the previous year. That's usually sort of like a prelude of what's going to happen next year. SEMA is a good testing

ground for the automotive market. Even if there is still a recession, people have to take some time off. It's like they say: "During a recession or hard times, bars are doing well and recreation is doing well." People want to take their mind off their problems.

*Phil Sasso is the president of Sasso Marketing (sassomarketing.com), an automotive aftermarket advertising, public relations and Internet services agency. He's also a speaker and strategist. And, sadly, his Caravan lacks a roof rack. Sign up for his free weekly marketing tip email at philsasso.com/blog.*

## OUR SOURCES

### Stephen Carl

C&C Car Worx, Wappingers Falls, N.Y.  
www.mycarworx.com

### Bogdan Durian

Delta Tech, Placentia, Calif.  
www.deltalights.com

### Dan Epting

Perrycraft, Winston-Salem, N.C.  
www.perrycraft.com

### Lane Carter

Restylers' Choice, Cincinnati, Ohio  
www.restylerschoice.com

### Kathy Knautz

Owens Products, Sturgis, Mich.  
www.owens-pro.com

### Rick Nauman

ATS Design, Cerritos, Calif.  
www.atsdesign.com

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