

Commentary

General Motors needs more than jolt of Volts

Dan Becker and James Gerstenzang

As General Motors faces the prospect of a fourth CEO in a year, there is good news and bad news about the iconic company. The good news is it has survived years of mismanagement, Hummers and other gas guzzlers. The bad news? We, the American people, own it.

Take a look in the executive suites, home for years to the folks who drove GM over a cliff. Steven Rattner, President Barack Obama's "car czar," said they "could not be allowed to continue after burning through \$34 billion in cash in barely a year."

And perhaps they won't. For starters, there's a new acting CEO, Edward E. Whitacre Jr.

Moving belatedly into the 21st century, General Motors now has an opportunity to find a chief who understands the new business environment, as well as the environment itself, and the role that cars and trucks play in both as the world grapples with global warming.

Here are two signs that the company may be trying to change course: It has reached outside, to Microsoft, for a new chief financial officer, and Vice Chairman Robert "Muscle Car Bob" Lutz appears to be out of contention for the top job.

Lutz is the guy who blogged that global warming is a "total crock of ----." In 2003, he said Toyota's hybrid-electric Prius was a public relations stunt. (Toyota has sold more than 1 million such "stunts" during the past decade.) Talk about your father's Oldsmobile.

Rather than charging up its anemic production of plug-in hybrid-electric Volts -- GM is making only 10,000 during the Volt's first year -- this Voldemort of the auto industry is continuing its reliance on pickups and SUVs. It produced more than 1.5 million of them last year.

And how about this for a judgment call? Instead of expanding its partnership with Toyota at their jointly run auto plant in Fremont, Calif., the company that is the poster boy for the auto industry's past is backing away from an opportunity to work with a company that has shown where the future lies.

GM's idea of sound public policy has been: Don't tell us to make cleaner cars. Just give us \$50 billion or so and some cash for clunkers.

The company's idea of a clean environment policy? Allow us to sell more gas guzzlers than the federal fuel economy law allows, in exchange for selling flex-fuel vehicles. Those are the cars and

trucks that can burn ethanol as well as gasoline, even though few do, and you can't find the fuel even if you want it.

One bankruptcy and three CEOs later, General Motors is at a crossroad. Dethroned in 2008 as the world's largest automaker, it entered 2010 in hock to the American taxpayers to the tune of \$50 billion.

Shouldn't it use this unique opportunity to find new executives who understand the new environment (think Apple, Amazon and, yes, Microsoft) and can adapt to change?

A short prescription: More clean cars, not just a small jolt of Volts. Stop pushing gas-guzzling pickups and SUVs on those who don't need them. Turn the company over to people who will look to the road ahead, not just in the rear view mirror.

Remember that canard: What's good for General Motors is good for the country? Now that GM works for us, the company should emphasize cutting our oil addiction, fighting global warming and saving money at the pump. What's good for the country is good for General Motors.

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