

Are Americans Buying the Nissan Leaf and Chevy Volt?

Last year, the [Nissan Leaf](#) and [Chevy Volt](#) won PM Breakthrough Awards. Now, nearly a year later, we catch up with them as sales figures begin to become available. So, how are these electric cars doing?

BY GARY WITZENBURG



U.S. sales figures for the Chevrolet Volt and Nissan Leaf are in for the first half of 2011, and at first glance, they don't look good. Only 3071 Chevy Volt extended-range electric vehicles were delivered to customers since they began arriving at dealerships in the first few "launch market" areas late last year. Nissan's Leaf electric vehicle bettered that by more than 800 units, with 3894 Leafs sold or leased by U.S. dealers through June 30 (including 19 in December 2010).

Skeptics will quote those numbers to contend that there is little U.S. demand for EVs. But not so fast—you have to look beyond sales numbers to understand the big picture.

Because both EVs have ramped up production at an excruciatingly slow pace, supply has not yet met demand.

The Volt

Last month, GM idled the Volt's Detroit-Hamtramck plant for four weeks so that the company could install upgrades needed to nearly quadruple Volt output capacity. Before the shutdown, fewer than 4300 2011 Volts had been built. But thanks to the upgrades, the company expects to produce about 16,000 Volts this year, and will be able to increase that number to 60,000 units for the 2012 calendar year.

In addition, many of the Volts that have been built aren't even for sale. Of the initial run, about 700 have been assigned to launch-market dealers as demonstrators, and 300 are being used for "internal purposes" (engineer and executive evaluations, continuing test and development, media test cars). Only about 200 were available on dealer lots as of July 1.

The GM plant should be back up and running this month. Chevy dealers nationwide will be getting Volts by the end of this year, and more than 2500 will have demo vehicles. GM will ship about 6000 2011 models and 15,000 2012s to overseas markets, leaving an estimated 10,000 Volts for U.S. consumers this year and roughly 45,000 in 2012.

"[The Volt] has one of the lowest inventory levels and highest turn rates in the industry," GM says in a statement, adding that "Volts are being sold as quickly as they arrive." Certainly the sales number would look better if dealers were allowed to sell their demos—and the demand is there, GM says. But the carmaker says that keeping them around for people to see and drive is more important in the long run: "The dealer demo program is the right strategy as the vehicle is drawing new customers into our dealerships."

The Leaf

Meanwhile, Nissan reports that 7554 Leafs had been delivered to customers worldwide as of June 3, mostly in Japan but including about 2000 in the U.S. And then June was its best month yet: With Leaf production beginning this spring in seven launch states— Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, Tennessee, Hawaii and Texas—Nissan reports that it moved 1708 Leafs in the U.S. Distribution will expand to seven more states (Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida and Alabama) by this fall, and to the rest of the country in 2012.

Nissan says it had 20,000 Leaf reservations (at \$99 a pop) in hand last fall, and so thousands of would-be buyers are still on waiting lists. The company won't release Leaf production numbers, but says that total global sales had increased to 9687 as of July 1. Leaf production stalled earlier this year because of the effects of Japanese tsunami, but the company is still on track to produce the Leaf in Tennessee by the end of 2012, it says. Nissan says the factory will be have the capacity to build 150,000 EVs per year to ship around the world.

The Lowdown

Production of both cars is still a long way from full capacity, but for the buyers who did get their hands on one, there's some interesting data. GM says nearly 90 percent of those who traded in vehicles for a 2011 Volt traded non-GM cars and are new Chevrolet customers, and 35 percent of Volt buyers did not consider any other vehicle. On average, Volt owners say they are driving more than 1000 miles (or about 30 days) before refilling their gas tanks, with two-thirds of those miles driven on electric power drawn from the grid.

Nissan does not yet provide customer satisfaction numbers, but its chart of overall usage by Leaf drivers shows that owners are still getting used to the rules of owning an all-electric car. More than 90 percent drive less than 100 kilometers (62 miles) per day, their average trip distance (as of April) was just 7 miles, and the average recharge time was 2 hours, 11 minutes. "So, among early owners, the vehicle has had plenty of range for their day-to-day usage," Nissan spokesperson Brian Brockman says. Perhaps as Leaf owners get more accustomed to the car and its range, they'll venture out a little farther.

It's still too soon to know how sales will shake out for these cars, especially with other competitors like Mitsubishi's i coming to the U.S. in the next few years. But despite the high sticker prices, (\$41,000 for the 2011 Volt, roughly \$33,000 for the Leaf), one thing we can say with confidence is that both the Volt and the Leaf will have waiting lists through 2012 as production catches up to demand.

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