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### Easier Ways To Car Shop Online

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If you've been shopping for a car recently, you know there are a lot of choices out there -- hundreds of models, to begin with, and each with often overwhelming numbers of options. Now, automotive Web sites are refining and retooling their services to help you sort through it all.

Changes at some of the most trafficked auto sites -- including Edmunds.com, Kelley Blue Book (kbb.com) and Autobytel.com -- are set to debut in coming months. This means auto buyers can expect to more quickly find specifics about particular vehicles and have better ways to use the Internet to narrow down choices. Consumers, for example, have often had to search for vehicles by segment -- car, truck, sport-utility vehicle -- but new search technology at some sites will allow shoppers to list features they want and then see at a glance what available vehicles match their desires.

When A.J. Teixeira started shopping for a car recently, he wanted a roomy family vehicle to zip around the Washington, D.C., suburbs. But the 38-year-old technical-support specialist found the choices puzzling. Subaru, owned by Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd., offered the car-based Tribeca. Then there was Mazda Motor Corp.'s Mazda 5 SUV and Toyota Motor Corp.'s Sienna van. In all, there were three different vehicles in three segments, all with a multitude of options.

Such clutter makes it "very difficult to find exactly what you want," says Mr. Teixeira, who spent a lot of time online for new wheels online, where he found helpful comments from current car owners, often revealing a vehicle's hidden flaws. "I wish you could pick and choose features" you want in a vehicle, he says.

Edmunds.com may grant Mr. Teixeira's wish this summer when it unveils a new search function that sorts results by features such as horsepower, cargo space and fuel economy. The new system will allow users to add and remove features and then see a list of all available vehicles that fit the criteria. The function is similar to those on airline-ticket sites that sort search results based on pull-down menus for times, destinations and number of passengers. Edmunds also just launched AutoObserver.com, a blog written by auto journalist Michelle Krebs, which is intended to keep customers and auto enthusiasts updated on news and trends.

This spring, Autobytel will launch a new Web site, MyRide.com, featuring so-called vertical-search technology. A vertical search, which is aimed at a niche audience, tends to provide more focused results than broad-based navigation searches on sites like those run by Google Inc. or Yahoo Inc. Currently, a "Honda Accord" search on Google returns millions of results, not all relevant for car-shopping. Autobytel will be joining a host of established vertical-search sites, including those for travelers (like TripAdvisor.com), those seeking detailed medical information (WebMD.com), and many other auto Web sites, such as Edmunds.

"If you look at the fact that Google crawls millions of sites and billions of pages, it's almost counterproductive to the consumer looking for very specific content," says Jim Riesenbach, Autobytel's chief executive. "We're only going to show you the things that are specifically relevant to the category." A Google spokeswoman says the company aims to help users find relevant information regardless of where they begin searches, including by providing Google search technology to vertical-search sites.

MyRide's search results will list vehicles, with photos, that most match the user's search terms. And similar to Edmunds, consumers can change features while perusing search results -- price range and mileage, for instance -- and see the listed results adjust. MyRide also aims to provide an online auto community similar to Facebook and MySpace: Users will be able to upload and share videos and photos, write reviews and create their own blogs.

Meanwhile, Kelley Blue Book, long known as an authority on resale value and price comparison, plans a "radically different" home page by April, according to Tim Nelson, Kelley's vice president of consumer

product strategy and management. Mr. Nelson wants Kelley to quickly adopt a more dynamic site. The site's current design is "static," Mr. Nelson says. "It appears we've sat still for a long time."

Kelley's new look will include features like car-review videos, tools that compare cars based on several different aspects and easier access to user comments. Becoming more shopper-friendly is "where we're looking to change," a Kelley spokeswoman says. Mr. Nelson also hopes the newly designed site will better showcase Kelley's car-review articles and other editorial content.

The changes reflect intensified competition among auto Web sites, as they each try to entrench themselves as authoritative arbiters amid a hypercompetitive vehicle market. About seven in 10 consumers use the Internet to shop for cars today, and many car dealers acknowledge that the days of an uninformed consumer walking into a showroom are long over. To that end, auto makers want to jazz up their own Web sites to engage customers before they set foot in a dealership. DaimlerChrysler AG's Dodge brand is testing chat technology that engages consumers when they visit Dodge's home page. General Motors Corp.'s Saturn and Ford Motor Co. say they are looking to do the same.

While tinkering with their own online presences, auto makers are sure to closely watch the changes being made by third-party auto Web sites. In the past, auto makers have taken issue with price representation and whether their vehicles show up alongside competitors' in certain searches. When listing a vehicle, for example, Edmunds lists a finite amount of competitors, based on its editorial judgment. Auto makers sometimes get miffed if they feel their vehicles were unfairly excluded. GM, for one, has "worked very hard to make sure the [online] selection process is fair," says Paul Ballew, GM's top sales analyst. But he added that the auto maker feels "increasingly better about the accuracy that's being portrayed on those sites."

Consumers will need the help. North American showrooms boasted more than 300 different models at the end of last year, according to the Power Information Network, up from 218 a decade earlier. The result: 73% of respondents in an Autobytel.com survey say there are too many new vehicle choices. In another batch of responses at the online car-shopping site, 69% said buying a car is more confusing today than five years ago. While not scientific, Autobytel says the snapshot survey gauges consumer sentiment.

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Gina Chon contributed to this article.

<b>Tune-Up Time</b>		
Some of the auto Web sites that are undergoing changes:		
Site	Unique Vistors (January 2007)	What's New
<b>Edmunds.com</b>	4,074,000	Improved search functionality will allow users to search vehicles based on several features, such as horsepower, fuel economy and towing capacity.
<b>Kelley Blue Book (KBB.com)</b>	4,570,000	Kelley's Web site plans a major design revamp, with the hopes of better displaying editorial content and becoming more "shopper-friendly."
<b>Autobytel Network (Autobytel.com)</b>	1,763,000	MyRide.com, launching in the spring, aims to be the online destination for all things cars. The site will employ vertical search technology, which produces more relevant search results. Designers also hope to empower users to share videos, photos and car reviews.
<b>Cars.com</b>	2,593,000	Users can now search vehicles based on four major lifestyle categories: Family, Play, Work and Eco-Friendly.
<b>Autotrader.com</b>	3,678,000	A "Credit Center" aims to quickly tell consumers their credit level and which dealers they can expect to work with based on the result.

Sources: Nielsen//NetRatings, WSJ Research

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