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AUTOFOCUS

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SECTION 9

Auto Sunday

Nissan Versa is a roomy, economical little sedan

By ANN M. JOB
For The Associated Press

Give carmaker Nissan credit for offering shoppers a deal. Just as the U.S. economy was taking a dive late last year, the company introduced a new version of its Versa sedan that's priced so low, it competes with used cars.

The new-for-2009 Versa 1.6 Sedan isn't some tiny car, either. It's classified as a mid-size because of its generous 94.3 cubic feet of passenger space and nearly 14 cubic feet of trunk room. Its interior is the largest of any entry-level car.

Best of all, the new Versa's starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, is \$10,710, which makes the Versa 1.6 the lowest-priced mid-size sedan, by far, on the U.S. market.

Typical mid-size sedans, such as the 2009 Toyota Camry and Ford Fusion, have starting retail prices of more than \$19,000.

Now, there is a catch: The base Versa 1.6 is compact in length on the outside — about the same length as a Honda Civic sedan.

But the Versa 1.6 has a taller profile than a Civic, which helps explain why the Versa sedan's measured interior room is large enough to warrant the "mid-size" label conferred by the federal government. Vertical space inside is so generous even people in the back seat have 37.9 inches of headroom.

The other thing that stands out in the base 1.6 sedan is that it is stripped down. It comes with roll-down windows, manual-only door locks and outside mirrors, no air conditioning and no radio. Yes, they really still make cars like this.

I wouldn't recommend an A/C-free car in this day and age, and Nissan thankfully offers a next-level-up sedan that includes A/C for a starting retail price of \$11,710.

Note the prices put this Nissan squarely amid several-year-old used Hondas and Toyotas that are popular among car buyers. The prices also undercut the \$13,640 starting retail price of the Hyundai Accent sedan.

Still, even with air conditioning, the test Versa 1.6 arrived without a radio, a key fob or power windows, power door locks or power mirrors. And you know what? That was OK, because it had lots of spunk and was fun and economical to drive, even if it wasn't fancy.

The 107-horsepower, four-cylinder engine doesn't sound like a lot, but the Versa comes with a five-speed manual transmission and weighs just 2,521 pounds, so it zips along roads with vigor.



COURTESY OF NISSAN
The 2009 Nissan Versa 1.6 is the lowest-priced mid-size sedan on the U.S. market.

At a glance

Price as tested: \$12,115

Engine: 1.6-liter, double overhead cam, inline four cylinder

City/highway fuel economy: 26/34 miles per gallon

Length: 176 inches

Wheelbase: 102.4 inches

Curb weight: 2,521 pounds

Built: Mexico

Destination charge: \$720

He never actually designed anything, but he knew talent and, most importantly, how to unleash it



GREG PERRY/
For Wheelbase
Communications

GIUSEPPE NUCCIO BERTONE

By JASON STEIN

Wheelbase Communications

The man behind the men was a fascinating fellow. One historian described him as someone who "oozed urban affluence; a short and foxy-faced man with a penchant for sharp tailoring and sunglasses."

Look at the old photos today, some twelve years after his death in 1997 at age 82, and you can still see the style, the confidence and the eye for talent.

But, then, that might have been Giuseppe "Nuccio" Bertone's greatest asset: his eyes.

Self-described as an automotive designer talent scout, Bertone never lifted so much as a pencil in all of his years influencing the world's best cars.

But, make no mistake, Bertone's talent is all around us, even to this day: the Lamborghini Espada and Countach; the Fiat 850 Spider; and the tribute to Enzo Ferrari's son, the Dino coupe.

Working from his Italian design shop — Carrozzeria Bertone — his creative team penned some of the most significant cars of the last century.

Some historians refer to Bertone as the greatest nurturer of design talent in history.

Perhaps for this reason, he didn't even mind living out of the spotlight, allowing his talented designers to make the family name a household name.

Bertone was born in 1912, two years after his father — Giovanni Bertone — opened a carriage building and repair facility in Turin, Italy.

Nicknamed "Nuccio," he joined his father's business in 1934, the same year the company exhibited its special-bodied Fiat Ardita (the Superaerodinamica) at the Turin Auto Show.

In those days, not all cars came with bodywork and there were few factories. Instead, customers looked to a mix of small companies to finish their new vehicle. Bertone was one of them.

But with one regular order, from

Pro-Files

Automotive legends and heroes

automaker Lancia in 1927, the Bertone family became the biggest of the companies that provided bodies.

Armed with a diploma in accounting, young Nuccio began the process of growing the family business while maintaining his hobby as an amateur racer. But when his father retired in 1952, Bertone was faced with a challenge. Few people wanted to wait for their own personal vehicle to be built. As well, many cars were being offered with integrated, welded steel bodies or modules called monocoques. Body panels were an inherent part of the design and the market for conventional carriage builders was shrinking.

Bertone, with his small series of special-bodied two-seat MG roadsters for the U.S. market, was struggling until Alfa Romeo came into the picture.

When Alfa asked Bertone to build 500 coupe bodies for a new car called the Giulietta Sprint, it was a turning point in automotive history.

Bertone had decided to invest in a manufacturing plant with stamping machinery that would allow his company to shape the Sprint's curvaceous panels. The order for 500 Alfas eventually became 40,000 and, as a natural extension of his business, Bertone was allowed to let loose his creative team and thus formed an internal design house.

With production concerns alleviated, Bertone's shop eventually helped manufacturers with styling, engineering and prototype construction and production.

Bertone would also let his styling chief, Franco Scaglione, run free. Scaglione, already well known around the world at the time, incorporated aircraft influences into aggressive shapes and wonderful pieces of rolling art.

When Scaglione left in 1959, Bertone

knew he could turn to Giorgetto Giugiaro, an amazingly talented young designer.

When Giugiaro left six years later, Bertone nurtured Marcello Gandini.

All his stylists would become internationally known designers with Bertone's studio fittingly pegged as the talent epicenter.

In it all, Bertone never forgot where he came from and who helped him become successful. When challenged, he could recall the names of colleagues some 60 years back as well as their designs. But he always hinted that there was room for improvement.

"I am pretty satisfied with the final results," he would say of his team, adding: "Well, nothing is perfect."

All the while, Bertone's shop continued to flourish. He opened a large factory in Grugliasco, near Turin, to build niche models for Alfa Romeo and Fiat.

The company set the bench mark for beautiful vehicles, including many Lamborghinis and Ferraris. In fact, inspiring and stunning design was to be expected, not hoped for.

In retrospect, Bertone was able to carry on what his father had begun, but was able to provide quantity and extra styling muscle for his customers.

During the 1970s and 1980s, fortunes fluctuated as there were hits as well as misses. But, mostly, Bertone set the standard. His once-tiny company stayed a world player in an era of globalization. Until his death in 1997, he earned accolades for being able to spot, develop and unleash talent.

He often visited the studio near Turin on Saturday mornings, "so as to not disturb the designers," he would say. But on Mondays, those same designers found his observations for each and every project.

The man behind the men lived in the shadows but left his mark on the world.

• Contact feature writer Jason Stein at www.wheelbase.us/mailbag.html.

Shops can do a better job in talking to customers

Q. I read your recent column about repair shop expenses and found it quite informative. I do not have a problem with what a shop charges; however, I do have a problem if the shop actually fixes the car.

Here is my scenario. I have a 2004 Lincoln LS. The Check Advancetrac will come up on the display and the ABS (brake) warning light will illuminate.

This happens only intermittently. Sometimes it stays on for a day or two and sometimes it shuts off the next time you turn off and on the car. I have Googled this and found it to be somewhat common but not always easy to diagnose.

I have read stories where the shop will say the problem is this part, replace that part and then discover it did not solve the problem. One guy was out \$800 and still had to take it back to find the problem. Do you think the shop gave him credit or a refund? No. This is totally unacceptable.

If it cost \$800 to fix the problem, fine. But if the tech is just replacing parts until the problem goes away then that is, in my opinion, theft. I am curious as to how your shop would handle a similar situation.

Will you yank out the part and refund the labor or give the car owner some other form of credit? Or is the car owner just out of luck?

A. Many times a failure in one of the high-tech systems like the issue you are describing with your Lincoln is a repair process. With ride control and traction control systems, sometimes it is not a failure in those systems at all but a failure in the engine management system. Some cars are designed to disable ride control and traction control when there is a failure in the engine management system.

Communication is very important here because the driver needs to know what was repaired and or replaced and why. Then if something else crops up it will be viewed as the next step in the process and not a failure to repair the car correctly. If I am ever put in the situation where I am not 100 percent sure something needs to be replaced, the customer will have the last say on whether or not to try it.

If I replace a part that does not fix the car and I made the call, it will be taken back off the car or if the labor to remove it exceeds the cost of the part, the customer will not be charged.

These problems do not generally occur when you are dealing with a shop that you know and trust and have built a relationship with. Find a shop that you trust and then trust the shop.

• Douglas Automotive is at 312 S. Hager Ave., Barrington, and 7218B Virginia Road, Crystal Lake. For information, visit douglasautomotive.com. Send questions to underthehood@dailyherald.com.



Doug McAllister
Under the hood

Chinese company to build hybrid car plant in Alabama

Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — A group of Chinese investors plans to construct a large-scale plant to manufacture hybrid automobiles in northern Baldwin County near Mobile.

Gov. Bob Riley and the chairman of Hybrid Kinetic

Motors, Yung "Benjamin" Yeung said the company is expected to begin operations in 2013 and will create more than 5,000 jobs.

Riley said he sees the announcement as another step forward for Alabama as the state's automobile

manufacturing industry continues to grow.

Hyundai, Mercedes-Benz and Honda currently have vehicle assembly plants in Alabama.

"Now as America and the world begin making a historic transition to a green

economy, we look to make Alabama a leader in the production of next-generation, clean-tech automobiles," Riley said.

The new plant would be located off Interstate 65 near Bay Minette.

Yeung said the company

will manufacture environmentally friendly vehicles that will use a hybrid engine fueled by natural gas, electricity and gasoline.

The company plans to build 300,000 vehicles per year in the first phase of production in 2012-14, officials said.