

Truckin'



More women are buying trucks today — and selling them too. Denise Labbe Ward, a truck saleswoman at Bob Sellers Pontiac/GMC, drives a GMC S-15 Jimmy.

...everybody's picking up on it

By Mary Rodrigue
staff writer

There was a time not so long ago when to see a woman in a pickup truck meant one thing — she was being held hostage.

Maybe Tom Blackwell's assessment is part humor, part exaggeration, but not much.

Women buying trucks and vans in unprecedented numbers is partly responsible for the boom that has truck sales surpassing new car sales in a trend insiders don't expect to end any time soon.

"If they're not coming out to buy them, they're sure picking out the colors," said Blackwell, new truck sales manager at Blackwell Ford in Plymouth.

THE RANGER pickup, a downsized version of the full-scale F150 pickup "has been the best-selling vehicle in the world the last few years going," according to Blackwell.

The Ranger and the Aerostar Wagon, a seven-passenger vehicle, are Ford Motor Co.'s most popular truck and van models. And in a price scale ranging from \$6,000 to \$12,000 for the Ranger and \$11,500 to \$17,000 for the Aerostar, it has wide consumer appeal.

"The popularity has to do with better visibility, the safety factor, they're as comfortable as most cars and easier to drive," said Ted Masters, new truck sales manager at Bob Sellers Pontiac, Farmington Hills.

Sellers' best sellers are the S15 Jimmy "a good all around family truck — easy to handle" and the Safari passenger van.

"Pickups still account for 40 to 50 percent of the market," said Masters.

"They appeal more to females now because they're not big and bulky or hard to operate, like in the past."

"They're stylish. You can get

them with every modern convenience imaginable — tilted wheel, tinted glass, you name it. Any feature you can put on a Cadillac you can put on a truck now. And with the downsizing of cars, for a family with two or three kids, there aren't many cars they can fit into comfortably. And it has the ability to hitch up to a trailer."

WHEN KATHY Cooper's husband, Don, surprised her with a Ford Aerostar Wagon a year ago, she admitted she was a bit intimidated by its size. But the Livonia mother of a preschooler became a quick convert to the comforts of motorizing by van.

The Coopers recently traded in that model for a new custom-designed Chevy van, complete with AM/FM stereo, CB radio, color television, snack tables, captain's chairs front and rear and a turtle-top roof.

"It handles well. It's good for

transporting things, and it's especially good for kids," Kathy Cooper said.

The most popular features are automatic transmissions and air conditioning, Masters added. "Beyond that you can get them loaded to the gills."

Aerostars, like many models, have their own laser-stripe packages, and colors vary greatly. The Cooper family van is white with silver trim.

"I remember years ago women wouldn't have anything to do with trucks. Now it's kind of the thing to have," Masters said.

WOMEN DON'T account for the entire market, of course. New converts to the world of light trucks — male and female — are constantly being made.

One Plymouth resident gave up his Chevy Vanza three years ago for an S10 Chevy Blazer.

"It goes in any kind of weather because it's a four-wheel drive,

there's lots of room to carry things around, and visibility is better. I'll never own another car," he said.

Last April, General Motors introduced a completely re-styled Sierra, offering a sleeker design but actually providing more leg room and more hip room. It has also proved to be a big seller.

Part of the appeal of trucks and vans is the four-wheel drive aspect, adaptable for all-terrain driving. And in Michigan, that's no small concern.

Bill Stuekel, truck sales manager for Crestwood Dodge in Garden City, calls truck sales "the brightest spot in the auto industry right now."

"Trucks appeal to the full spectrum of buyers, from young to old. I expect '88 will be even better. Trucks are more comfortable, multi-purpose vehicles."

Dodge offers the Dakota, a mid-sized pickup, and imports such as the Ram 50.

Midnight Cafe plays hard but not heavy

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The reason they play known heavy-metal venues is there are few other places to play.

"That's one of our problems," said Vincent "Vinz" Panzo, percussionist for the band. "There are only heavy-metal clubs or (Top 40 clubs) to play. There's no in-between for us."

As a result, Midnight Cafe finds itself in a rather unique position: playing for an audience of head bangers. Surprisingly, their music goes over rather well.

Heck, even some of the heavy-metal crowd might get up and dance once in awhile to Midnight Cafe's music.

The blend of music has been developed primarily in the last year. The group already has 30 songs written and are in the process of shopping around for a record deal.

LESSNAU, WHOSE father is noted jazz pianist and movie producer Bobby Laurel, does the majority of the writing for the group. The five others provide the musical input.

Midnight Cafe clicked from day one, say members.

"The chemistry is there," said Charles Barnard, 23, of Redford Township and keyboardist with the band.

"We're all good friends," Slitti added. "This is my last band. This is it."

Midnight Cafe is made up of diverse musical backgrounds. Barnard has classical and jazz roots. Panzo has been in a blues band, a reggae band and a hard-rock band.

Slitti's musical resume is dotted with hard-rock experience as is that of Christopher Kolano of Westland, who plays guitar, keyboards and writes songs for the band.

GORDON SPENCER, who is originally from Los Angeles, has played in numerous blues bands. He joined

"That's one of our problems. There are only heavy-metal clubs or (Top 40 clubs) to play. There's no in-between for us."

— Vincent 'Vinz' Panzo
Midnight Cafe

Midnight Cafe recently after answering an ad in a newspaper for a bass player.

"He can thump," Slitti said of Spencer.

Lessnau comes from a diverse background which includes classical music and heavy metal ("It's irritating on the throat," Lessnau says about singing heavy metal).

"When a five-album set from CCR (Creedence Clearwater Revival) comes on TV, I'll pick it up," Lessnau said. "When a five-album set from Tchikovsky comes on, I'll pick up that no problem."

He has his father to thank for that. When Bobby Laurel was home, nothing but jazz and classical music was played.

Lessnau said his father has been an inspiration, especially in the area of songwriting.

"A day doesn't go by where he doesn't ask me, 'Have you found something else to do yet?'" Lessnau said of his father, who produced "The Rosary Murders." "He's speaking in terms of the ups and downs of the business."

"He also knows what it's like to have music in your blood. You have to play."

Midnight Cafe will perform Wednesday and Thursday, Nov. 4-5, at the Token Lounge in Westland. For more information, call 322-0245.

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