

Coolest new car colors

A car that changes from pink to white as it drives by? The latest developments in manufacturing make fancy paint colors mainstream.

By Peter Valdes-Dapena, CNNMoney.com staff writer

NEW YORK (CNNMoney.com) -- As I drove north on the New Jersey Turnpike recently, a Mary Kay cosmetics saleswoman in a Cadillac DTS passed me on the right, her big car's paint job hitting me like a punch in the eye from the Pink Panther.

As it zoomed on past the car gradually changed color. Starting at the edges, the pink faded and turned to a pearly white.

Back in New York City, during the media preview days for the New York Auto Show in early April, I spent some time talking to Chris Webb, General Motors' Exterior Color and Trend Designer. He helped design the paint used on that car.

"We have a dedicated line that just runs the Mary Kay cars for them," said Webb.

If you want drive a color shifting pink-pearl Cadillac yourself, you'll have to get a job with Mary Kay and start moving some serious eyeliner for the privilege.

Color shifting pigments aren't entirely new - Mary Kay has been using that paint on its cars for almost a decade - but they have now entered the mainstream and are bringing new popularity to once boring shades.

Silver isn't silver anymore. Black might not always be black. Around the edges of the wheel wells it might glisten in purple or gold. Where the body curves inward, hints of blue or red might shine from the shadows.

The secret is extra layers of coating embedded with tiny metal flakes. The standard process for painting a car in a factory was - and still is - to lay down a layer of color and cover that with a clear coat. The clear coat gives the color a wet-looking shine and a sense of depth.

Now, the colored base coat can be covered with a second translucent layer that could be a different color. And within that second translucent layer there could be little flecks of aluminum and those flecks can, themselves, be another color. Or several other colors.

"The pink you saw had a solid pink base coat with silver layer sprayed on top," said Webb.

At the extreme of color shifting paints are the ChromaFlair colors created by JDS Uniphase. These pigments use colorless flakes which refract light creating colors in the same way that butterfly wings and bird feathers do.

A ChromaFlair color called "scorched penny" is used in the 2006 special-edition Scion xB Release Series 4.0 from Toyota. It changes colors dramatically from one viewing angle to another, going from a bright copper to nearly black.

The painting process required for these sorts of effects is expensive, so car companies charge more for them. But that just makes them more alluring.

"If you tell people you're going to charge them for a paint they like it even more," said Barb Parker, a color designer with JDS Uniphase.

Of GM's 26 car manufacturing plants, only five can do a "tri-coat" process, said Webb, so paint researchers are creating some of the same effects by just adding color flakes directly into the base coat.

These developments make life even more challenging for people like Webb whose job it is to predict what colors will be popular five or more years from now.

Right now, orange is going strong and should last. "Orange sales are increasing in popularity," he said. "I've developed orange products right up to 2010."

Copper-tinged oranges can be found on everything from the Chevrolet Corvette to the Ford Edge SUV to Honda's Fit subcompact car.

Hues known in the industry as "naturals" - colors you and I would call brown and beige - are benefiting from these new color technologies. Today, browns can have a depth and richness reminiscent of expensive wood furniture. It's the sort of look that reminds one of craftsmanship and luxury rather than Silly Putty or mud.

"You're seeing a lot more consumer products offered in browns than maybe in previous years," said Jane Harrington, manager of color styling for PPG's automotive coatings division.

Greens are expected to see a resurgence as sales of hybrid vehicles increase, said Webb. People like to advertise their car's "greenness" in a fairly literal way. (Greens have been on the out lately as blues have become more popular. For some inexplicable reason, said Webb, blue and green alternate in popularity.)

Ford is working hard on, quite literally, the new black.

"Black is going to get more special and it's going to surprise and delight," said Susan Lampinen, Ford's chief designer for color and materials.

The new black will be used across Ford's line-up.

"We want to be the leaders in black," Lampinen said.

Looking ahead, the next frontier in car colors is dull. Very dull. By the 2010 model year, Webb hopes to be able to produce special car colors with no sheen to them whatsoever, as dull as a dusty kindergarten chalkboard.

"There would have to be caveats as to how to take care of the vehicles," he said.

Otherwise, someone might wax the car. That would just ruin the whole effect.

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