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HOW GREEN IS OUR VALLEY?

Green Drivers Take to the Road in Hybrid Cars

Drivers Ed Direct teaches rules of the road while educating the next generation of drivers about environment



By Davis A. Marcus

Eric Creditor and Chris Kramer, co-founders of a recently launched Drivers Education School in the Valley, aim to put a lot of safe, new drivers on the road. That is also one of their concerns - more drivers on the road mean more cars. More cars mean an increase in air pollution, gas consumption and oil production. For the environmentally-conscious businessmen, the dilemma was enough to drive them to *think*.

The innovative team drew both on their experience in the field and their visionary perspective to launch the first Drivers Ed school in L.A. to feature an all-hybrid fleet of cars. "It's all about education," says Creditor, "getting the message out there. By showing teens early the importance of the environment, we believe they will be more likely to change their behavior."

But don't assume Creditor, and his partner Kramer, are a couple of tree-hugging hold-outs from the sixties. They are young, smart businessmen who saw an opportunity to appeal to the trend-loving side of teens in order to draw them in, and get their message out, at the same time. And, it seems, they've covered every angle.

Drivers Ed Direct is also one of the only driving schools to offer instruction in an SUV (the Ford Escape Hybrid), the vehicle many teens find themselves driving when they borrow the family car.

Creditor and Kramer, have a lot going for them—their youth (both are 32,) their business savvy, and their years of watching the world of drivers' education change, or, more correctly, changing it themselves. Friends since grade school, the San Fernando Valley natives went through CSUN business school together. Afterwards, the two entered the

emerging traffic-school classroom business, individually and jointly pioneering developments in the industry. Building on the growing use of home computers, the team then launched Trafficschool.com in 1999, a 'ticket dismissal course' so popular that it has grown to serve fifteen states. Rather than coast on their success, the partners put it into high gear. In 2002 they developed "Drivers Ed Direct", an interactive internet course designed primarily for teens learning to drive. But, there was still a big piece of the puzzle missing for these two big-picture kind of guys.

It is with the required six hours of instruction time behind-the-wheel that the founders of Drivers Ed Direct think they can make their biggest impact. "Great environmental movements have started in California," insists Creditor. "Hybrids are no different to drive than other cars. Kids will share that information with their parents."

Taking that cue, it was my turn to get behind the wheel.

TAKING A HYBRID FOR A SPIN

Head instructor Tom Milewski guided me through a typical lesson, starting with inserting the key-fob into the Toyota Prius' dash and pressing the power button. And, then . . . nothing. I expected to hear a futuristic version of vroom-vroom but the engine, in electric mode, is virtually silent. The power light on the dash was the only indicator that the car was actually running. Once moving, I was astounded at the smooth acceleration.

The internal combustion engine kicks in to assist the electric motor at cruising speeds and during heavy acceleration, but it was impossible to discern the transition. After pointing out that hybrids don't have to be plugged in, Tom had plenty of opportunity to point out

my (minor) driving mistakes - I strung out the lesson as long as I could because the Prius was such fun to drive, and because I was busy counting the interested looks we were getting.

THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE

Just as in-your-face as the car's colorful paint job is the realization that hybrids are more than just a passing fad. "I really do believe that the trend is moving faster than analysts predict," says Creditor. He must be right. Motor Trend Magazine named Toyota Prius the 2004 Car of the Year. For Valley residents, it's a true no-brainer. Considering the amount of smog we endure, who wouldn't want a hybrid, with 90% fewer smog-forming emissions than even low-emissions vehicles? The estimated 60/mpg for city driving and 51/mpg for highway also make hybrids a perfect fit for Los Angeles. And there is good news for those who fear the gas savings don't justify the higher sticker price: A new federal energy bill will give hybrid-buyers a tax credit, anywhere from \$1,700 to

\$3,000, in addition to the \$2,000 income tax deduction they already receive. And recent legislation will soon allow drivers of most hybrids to use the carpool lane when cruising solo.

SAFETY FIRST

In addition to being green, Drivers Ed Direct gets high points for putting more than the usual emphasis on safety. Co-founder Kramer emphasizes that, "None of our cars are base model cars. All have extra safety equipment such as side & head curtain airbags and stability control systems." All cars are also equipped with video cameras to digitally record training sessions, which assist in the learning process. GPS Navigational systems, standard in Drivers Ed Direct cars, teach teens how to use technology in a safe way.

For more information, contact Drivers Ed Direct 16693-B Roscoe Blvd. North Hills, CA 91343 (800) 728-1048, (818) 891-4970 or visit their website: www.DriversEdDirect.com