

PRE-OWNED WHEELS

Different brands, but the same cars



Three makers, one van: Saturn Relay, left; Buick Terraza, right; Chevy Uplander, below.



How come? And is it okay to buy a vehicle from a maker that doesn't exist anymore?

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Ever wonder why there are so many different brands of cars? And beyond that, as manufacturers get rid of some, should you buy a used car from a brand that isn't being made anymore?

Generally, the answer is yes, it's okay, because most were simply versions of other vehicles made by the same automaker.

Known as "badge engineering," it's the practice of making one model and then giving it a unique appearance or trim levels for different brands.

So a Chevrolet Cobalt is also a Pontiac Pursuit/G5, while a Plymouth Voyager is a Dodge Caravan, and a Mercury Marquis is a Ford Crown Victoria.

Finding brand-specific trim parts may be more difficult as the vehicle ages, but most dealerships or aftermarket shops should have no trouble repairing them.

Badge engineering is most common among the domestic manufacturers, but there are examples elsewhere: the Acura CSX is based on the Honda Civic, while Lexus' ES is essentially a Toyota Camry under its skin.

General Motors shed the most number in recent years, discontinuing Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Hummer and Saturn, and selling Saab. Chrysler built its last Plymouth in 2001; Ford closed its Canadian Mercury dealers in 1999, and will discontinue the brand in the U.S. at the end of this year.

So why did the domestics have so many, when the import automakers have so few? It's primarily due to the companies' history and the way cars were sold in Canada and the U.S.

Ford and Chrysler were named for men who initially developed a single car. Conversely, GM was founded by a businessman who didn't build cars himself, but bought up existing companies such as Buick, Cadillac and Oldsmobile, adding more than 30 car- and parts makers by 1920.

Companies tended to set their price ranges by their brands, since customers of the day seldom bought expensive cars if others were driving cheaper models carrying the same name.

Ford bought the high-end Lincoln, an independent automaker at the time, and then developed Mercury to fit between it and the lower-priced Ford. At Chrysler, you could also choose a Plymouth, Dodge, DeSoto or Imperial.

The dealership network played a huge role. Very few sold all of the automaker's brands, and so some dealers didn't get popular models, especially if the company's truck was under a different nameplate. The most cost-effective solution was to take one model and make it work for everyone.

In Canada, where Chrysler/Plymouth dealers didn't get Dodge

trucks, the company added different trim to the Dodge and named it Fargo for these stores. Ford did the same thing with its Ford pickup, giving a Mercury truck to Lincoln/Mercury dealers. GMC was the result of two truck companies bought, blended and renamed in 1911, while Chevrolet joined GM in 1918, but they were soon sharing models.

Fargo and Mercury trucks are long gone, but GMC remains, since many buyers prefer them to the mechanically-identical Chevrolet trucks (in Canada, sales are split almost evenly between the two).

In contrast, German and Japanese automakers entered the continent much later, selling a limited number of models and slowly building up their dealer networks.

Rather than buy existing high-end companies, as GM and Ford did early in their histories, the Japanese

spun off their own, a slow and expensive process: Toyota's Lexus, Honda's Acura and Nissan's Infiniti. With only two brands each (Toyota has since added a third, Scion), there wasn't much need for badge engineering.

The rising popularity of Japanese brands in the 1980s — coinciding with a considerable drop in quality from the domestics — led GM to introduce Saturn. Although Saturns weren't initially duplicated in GM's lineup, they eventually came into the corporate fold: the 2006 Saturn Relay minivan was the Chevrolet Uplander, which was the Buick Terraza.

Although rarer, name changes can also make a car seem like an orphan. Lincoln's Zephyr was renamed MKZ in 2007 — and both were based on the Ford Fusion. And models don't necessarily have to look alike to be siblings under the hood: Hummer H3 is the steroid-popping brother of the Chevrolet Colorado pickup truck.

Saab is scheduled to return through independent dealerships later this year, but before buying a used one, find out if you're near one of the dealers that can service it (www.saab.ca), since the 9-3 and 9-5 were unique models made in Sweden by Saab (the 9-7X was based on the Chevrolet Trailblazer, the 9-2X on the Subaru Impreza).

Otherwise, as long as the original parent company is still around, your "orphan" vehicle should still be fine.