



Industry looks to temper public expectation on electric vehicles

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With many obstacles to hurdle before EVs become viable for the mass market, automakers look to the long-term

Ask anyone about the future of the automotive industry and the answer is undoubtedly 'electric'. However, for those aware of the issues and limitations that are currently part of electric vehicle (EV) development, there is an increasing awareness that they must not be presented as the solution to all our energy and emission problems.

Whilst aggressive emissions targets beyond 2020 will necessitate the widespread introduction of electric vehicles, this does not mean the death of petrol engines anytime soon. The general consensus across the industry is that the internal combustion engine (ICE) is here to stay and will complement electric vehicles where necessary. Issues such as road haulage alone will ensure the future of the ICE.

At a recent CLEPA forum on the contribution of electric vehicles to the industry, Dr. Richard Auymayer of Bosch said that "our task is now managing expectation" with regards to EVs. At the same conference, German MEP Jorgo Chatzimarkakis made the general point that the term electric vehicle must not become 'buzzword' in the way that 'biofuels' has been allowed to and having its importance overstated to the wider public.

Part of the problem is price competitiveness. Ecologically minded consumers are currently willing to pay a premium – as much as €3000 in some cases – for a vehicle that is kind to the environment, if not their wallet. But if EVs are to go from niche to mass market they need to get cheaper and more practical.

Derek de Bono of Valeo stated that in order for EVs to have a real impact, the cost of them needs to fall by some 40% over the next five years. This is also given further imperative as incentive programs for EVs will fall by the wayside as western governments start to deal with their deficit problems. De Bono went on to add that carmakers need to start production as quickly as possible on first generation EVs and also begin designing second generation EVs.

The greatest issue to price reduction in electric vehicles though remains cell manufacture, which will have to see costs halved in order for EVs to become viable for the mass market. Even then cost differences between them and an equivalent petrol vehicle will remain prohibitive for most consumers.

Along with this the ongoing construction of an infrastructure within major cities for charging vehicles remains an issue, with many competing technologies currently available. One theory amongst automakers is that an electric vehicle could become a natural choice as a second car, and be used for the bulk of short journeys, whilst the initially-purchased petrol car is used on occasional long journeys. This approach also shows that the industry regards EVs not as a silver bullet, but as part of a number of solutions, along with increasing the efficiency of powertrains.

Though the challenges remain great for EVs, they are they key to reaching emission targets as efficient powertrains will only go so far. IHS Global Insight forecasts that EVs will account for around 20% of the global light vehicle market by 2030. While no-one is disputing their importance in future in the industry, there is still a long way to go in their development.