



THE PLUG-IN CHALLENGE

“Eat My Voltage” was one of the first print ads for the Prius when it made its U.S. debut in 2000. And while it heralded the early stages of the electrification of the automobile, there were concerns that this new technology would be confused with pure electrics, which required plugs and recharging stations.

“It was a big thing for us to let people know that you don’t have to plug it in,” recalls Geoff Partain, who worked his way up from an intern on the original Prius to become product planner for the second-generation model. “Now it is ironic that we are offering a ‘Super Prius’ plug-in model that delivers 11 miles of all-electric range.”

As with any new technology, educating the public about what the Prius was and how it operated was key. Chief among these efforts was the 6-city tour to put Prius right-hand drive models into the hands of consumers. The goals were simple—to show the Prius drove and operated just like any other car.

And yet, the Prius wasn’t just any other car. The way it tracked fuel economy and provided the drivers with instant feedback on their performance made the experience not unlike a video game, where people would try to maximize the car’s fuel efficiency. A new kind of enthusiast was born, one not so interested in how quickly they could drive, but rather how far they could go on a gallon of fuel. And while these two camps of drivers have different expectations, the passion is remarkably similar.

Partain said the Prius was the kind of car that “made people feel good about themselves and the environment.” He also believes that one of the reasons people took a chance on the car was Toyota’s reputation—that the company’s high quality and dependability ratings created a halo for the Prius. And now that the car is established as a benchmark in the hybrid market, he believes that Prius has become a halo for the Toyota brand.

As the technology has evolved, Partain said expectations have continued to change with it. “Nowadays, many people aren’t even interested in a car unless it gets more than 40 mpg.”

Continued demand for higher fuel economy and the growing availability of electric recharging stations will expand the opportunity for plug-in hybrids in the future. Acceptance of the plug-less Prius was a crucial first step in readying consumers for a future that will include more plug-ins.

