

From Daring to Decade-Defining: A Prius Retrospective

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At the turn of the 1990s, Toyota set its sights on the century ahead. While SUVs and larger trucks guzzled their way to kingpin status within the automotive industry, Toyota outlined its environmental goals in its ambitious [1992 Earth Charter](#).

“We were coming out with this gas-saving vehicle at a time when large SUVs were the vehicle du jour,” says Heather Updegraff, general manager, Vehicle Marketing and Communication. “It was a moonshot idea.”

Armed with the charter’s ambitious agenda — including a zero-emission future, and commitment to eco-conscious innovation — Toyota sought to create the first hybrid vehicle produced on a global scale. With revolutionary ideas came a revolutionary solution: the Toyota Prius.

A Car for the New Millennium

Despite a warm welcome in Japan (the original model won Japan’s 1997 Car of the Year), the Prius was met with rising doubts when it faced the international automotive market. When the first-generation Prius arrived in North America in 2000, its futuristic design raised eyebrows and conservational ambitions discounted. Undaunted by the criticism, Toyota’s designers completely reimagined the Prius for its 2003 release. On the outside, the second-generation Prius established the model’s now iconic wedge-shaped liftback. Its innerworkings boasted equally impressive improvements, including an all-electric AC system, upgrade to the Toyota Hybrid System, and enhanced fuel efficiency to an EPA-estimated rating of 48 city/45 highway/ 46 combined. The car for the new millennium had been updated for its new audience — the question was whether the international community would respond accordingly.



Celebrity in Its Own Right

The second-generation Prius went on to move hundreds of thousands of units internationally, far exceeding its predecessor in sales and popularity. What made this version of Prius particularly compelling, however, is exactly *who* was buying some of these vehicles. With the advent of accessible internet access across the United States, the Prius thrived in a burgeoning pop culture landscape. In lieu of a limousine, some celebrities chose to arrive at the Oscars in the eco-conscious model. Actors and writers Will Ferrell and Larry David extolled their hybrids, casting them as inanimate side characters in their cinematic and television work. Gossip magazines compiled

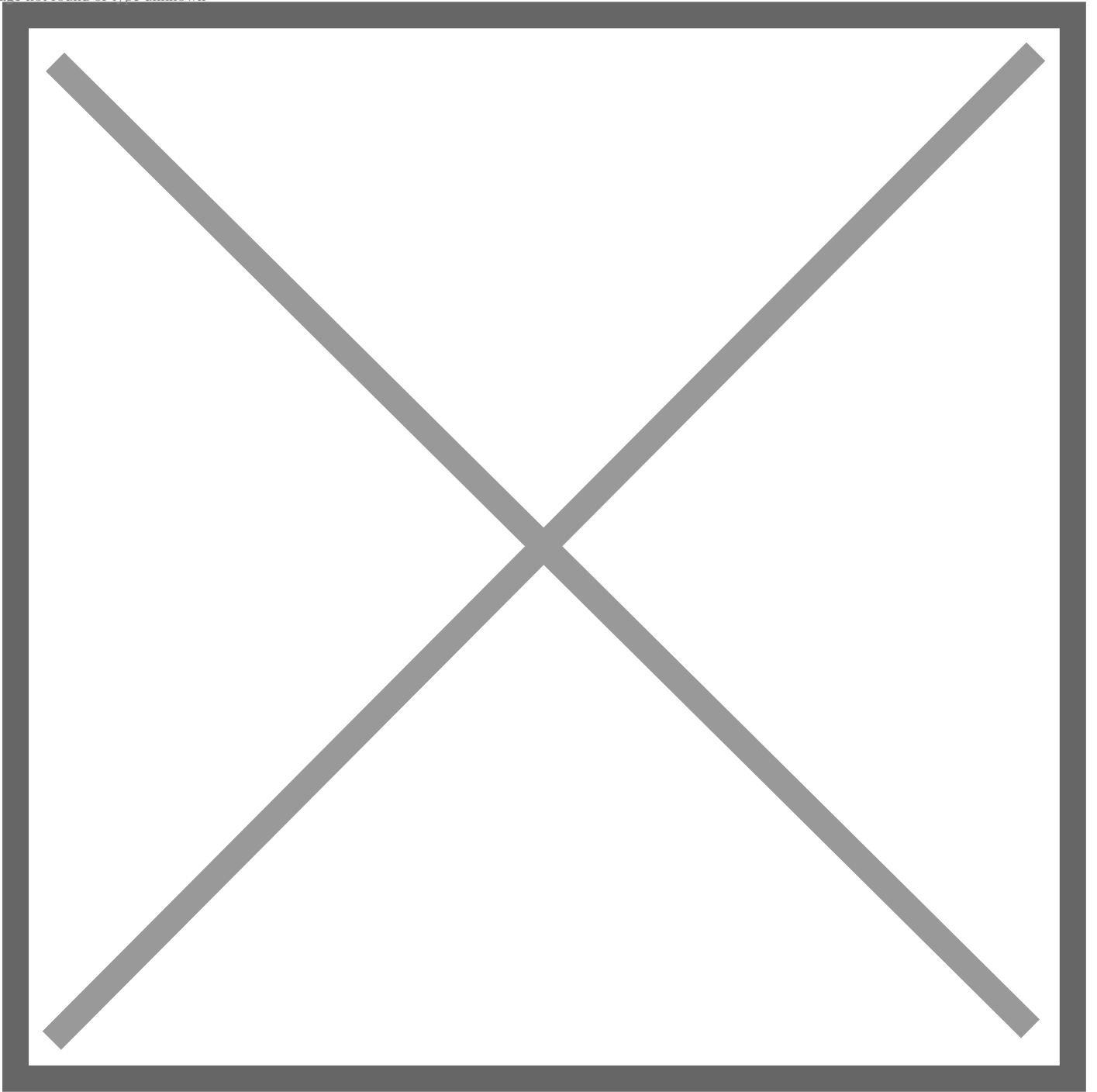
paparazzi clips of actress Cameron Diaz grabbing coffee and heading to star-studded dinners — all in her Prius.

“It became synonymous with environmentalism and advanced tech,” says Updegraff. “It was making a statement and so I think it became an icon.”

The second-generation Prius changed the game again. Identifiable and with a growing fan base, it became a favorite with high-profile drivers such as Oscar winners Leonardo DiCaprio and Natalie Portman. A Prius in the early 2000s projected intelligence, consciousness and style — if you were willing to take a spot on a growing waiting list for it.

“It was the second gen that really changed the perspective and made it more of a mainstream vehicle,” Updegraff adds.

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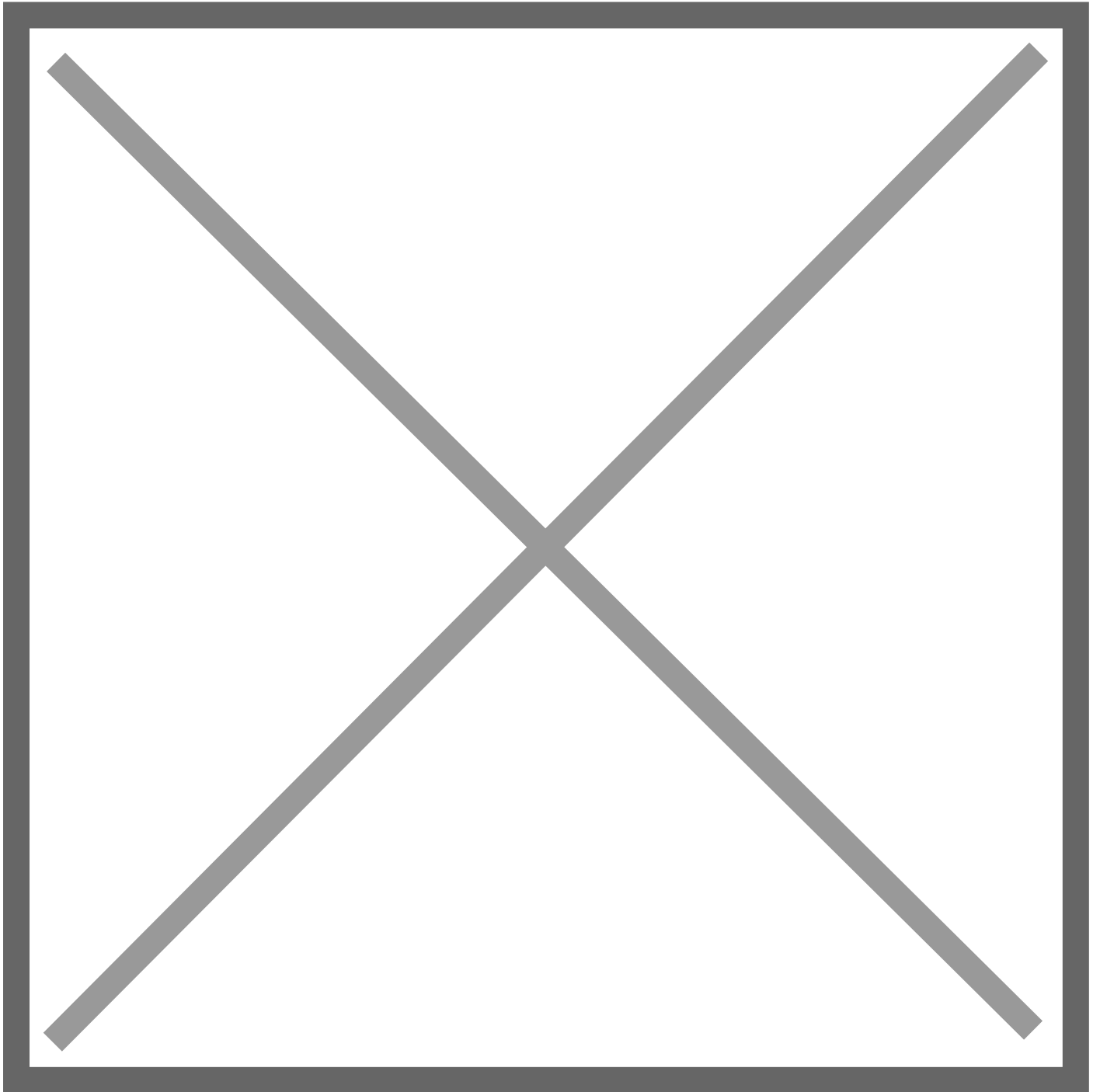


“More Green for Less Green”

The early aughts signaled a seismic shift toward environmental awareness. Al Gore’s award-winning 2006 documentary [*An Inconvenient Truth*](#) shocked international audiences into researching their personal impact on global climate change. The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign saw environmental concerns rise from the background to the political battleground, with fossil fuel dependence and clean energy entering debates as critical issues. With a commitment to putting its best carbon footprint forward, Toyota remodeled the Prius, which the Environmental Protection Agency had [already designated](#) one of the cleanest vehicles on the market.

The third-generation Prius was equipped with a solar ventilation system when in park, an electric water pump to eliminate accessory belts and 1.8-liter engine for greater fuel economy.

The model's popularity greenified the automotive industry for an increasingly conscious audience. Seeing the success of the Prius, other brands launched their own hybrid models to meet public demand. Yet, it is still the original — the Toyota Prius — that remains synonymous with hybrid vehicle technology.



Eyes on the Future

As the growing Prius customer base ranged from celebrity clientele to young city dwellers to suburban parents, their needs as drivers continued to diversify. In response, Toyota introduced the original hybrid line of Prii — the much-debated plural for the Prius, as selected by popular vote during Toyota’s “Prius Goes Plural” naming campaign. The members of this original “Prius family” were the Prius c, the Prius v, and the Prius Liftback. Their success would go on to spawn Toyota hybrid options in popular models like the Corolla and the Avalon.

In 2015, the fourth-generation Prius continued the hybrid’s legacy of innovation, modernizing the design for increased aerodynamics and updating the engine for a maximum thermal efficiency of 40%. However, for Toyota, success does not necessarily spell satisfaction. The goal was to translate the advances of the Prius throughout the brand.

“Rather than saying a hybrid is an environmental powertrain for the high-tech-focused customer, it’s now across the lineup,” says Updegraff. “You can get a hybrid powertrain in many of our models, and by 2025 we are planning for every one of our models to have an electric powered option.” As Updegraff explains, the success of the Prius helped set the stage for other hybrid vehicles so that customers don’t have to choose between an eco-conscious vehicle and their own needs.

When Toyota introduced the Prius to North American drivers, the automaker challenged consumers to share its vision for a greener economical millennium. Twenty years and four model generations later, the resulting Prius has carved itself a wedge-shaped niche in automotive history. “The company set a vision — to develop this car for the future — and we did it,” says Updegraff. “It makes me think anything Toyota sets our mind to, we can do.”

