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Chrysler brand aims 'S' at younger crowd

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SAN DIEGO — With just four models and an average customer age of 62, Chrysler brand has the Chrysler Group's thinnest lineup, lowest volume and oldest buyers.

But Chrysler has a plan to expand its offerings, boost sales and attract younger customers: a new line of vehicles, dubbed S, that arrives in the spring.

The plan aims to keep traditional customers happy with the beige leather interiors, wood accents and chrome grilles they want, and woo younger customers with different styling in the S vehicles.

The ins and outs of S

What's in

- Carbon fiber
- Blacked-out grilles
- Red leather
- Factory-approved accessories for customizers

What's out

- Chrome grilles
- Beige leather
- Traditional wood accents

"There are two paths: the traditional Chrysler path and the S path," Tim Kuniskis, head of

Chrysler brand product marketing, told journalists at the Chrysler 300 media launch event here. "There's a huge customer base for chrome and wood. There are also people who want something a little edgy."

Edgy means blacked-out grilles, red leather seats with an S logo and carbon fiber in place of chrome and wood.

S doesn't stand for "sport." Chrysler already has its sporty SRT line. "Style" might be a better word for a brand that used the slogan "It's time to arrive in style" in its recent Golden Globe Awards TV spot.

Says Kuniskis: "Think of it as two kids — this one grew up in subur-

ban Detroit and this one grew up in Huntington Beach, Calif. It's a sub-brand."

"There will be dealers who won't get S at all," and others who will immediately understand the concept, Kuniskis said. The S line also will open new possibilities for Chrysler owners to customize vehicles with wheels and accessories.

Chrysler will not sell the S vehicles as upscale variants of the 300. Rather, S versions will be sold in all three trim levels of the 300: the entry level 300, the 300 Limited and the loaded 300C.

The S line will go into production this spring, probably starting with an S version of the Chrysler 200.

The 300 will get the S treatment later. Chrysler hasn't decided on an S version of the Town & Country minivan.

The real test for the S strategy will be the Chrysler 300 sedan, redesigned and re-engineered for 2011.

With its 2005 introduction, the Chrysler 300 became a darling of the bling crowd. Buyers personalized their cars by adding accessories such as custom grilles and wheels.

But the buzz faded in recent years, along with sales. In 2010, the 300 was outsold by its platform twin, the Dodge Charger, by a ratio of 2-to-1: 75,397 to 37,116. **AN**