

Automotive News

Over 35 years, even 'MotorWeek' host John Davis can't predict every hit and miss



John Davis, who will be 68 in April, says he has no plans to slow down. He says he plans to remain the face of the show for the foreseeable future.

February 16, 2016 - 11:00 am ET CHICAGO -- His booming voice and broad smile, familiar to millions of automotive enthusiasts for 35 years, has lost none of its verve, I observe as I watch John Davis, 67, describing the Volvo XC90 in a video clip at the Chicago Auto Show.

Host of public television's "MotorWeek" -- the longest-running show of its type in TV history -- Davis has been test driving, reviewing and chronicling the changes in automobiles for TV since the days of Ronald Reagan. In

front of a few hundred reporters here, Davis is handing out the show's annual Driver's Choice Award for the best vehicle it tested in 2015.

When he sums up the XC90 by saying, "You can pay a lot more in the luxury crossover field and walk away with a lot less," you understand why he has earned the viewer's trust -- one reason "MotorWeek" is aired on 92 percent of all PBS stations, as well as internationally.

After the award presentation, I had a chance to chat with Davis for a few minutes about his long career behind the wheel. We also discussed the big move to electrification and self-driving cars.

But the real fun is hearing Davis talk about some of the vehicles he got absolutely wrong -- cars that flopped that he thought couldn't miss, and cars that he wrote off that turned out to be big hits.

Here's a condensed version of our conversation.

Davis on self-driving cars:

"I was on a radio show about 18 months ago. I was asked by the host about self-driving cars. I love driving, and autonomous cars are not something I am looking forward to. The phones lit up. And I was hearing from all segments of the population. They were saying, 'Do you realize what a boon this would be for someone who is too old to drive, people who are vision-impaired and who have other physical issues that prevent them from driving?'

This would open a whole new area of freedom to them that they had lost, much like getting a driver's license when I was 16 opened up freedom to me. So, I really started thinking about it very, very differently. I've changed my attitude. I think they have a place. All the systems that are being developed for autonomous cars are pretty terrific."

Davis on Tesla and electric vehicles:

"Tesla is here to stay, but the question is who will own them. Will it stay with Mr. Musk, or will someone else come in and say, 'That's a great

operation, but it is going to need huge infusions of cash.' I wouldn't be surprised to wake up one morning and find some other big global automaker has snapped them up, especially when the price of their stock is depressed. I think what they have done is shown that an electric car can be more than just a 'greenie's' way to get around. It can be a prestige symbol. And they built a car that, frankly, nobody in our business expected them to build, a car with such high quality right off the bat. When the Model S came out, it had the quality that rivaled some of Germany's best and that shocked us.

"Having said that, I think there is a place for electric cars, especially with cars like the Chevy Bolt that have broken through the \$30,000 price point and 200-mile range barrier that I thought the minimum to make these vehicle more widespread. As battery technology advances and the price comes down I think electric cars will have a place. Is it going to be 5 percent of the market? Maybe long term. I don't see it becoming huge. I do see electrification, hybrids of all sorts and basically using electric power for things like all-wheel drive systems, becoming much, much bigger. I wouldn't be surprised in 10 years to see 30 percent of the new car fleet having some form of serious electrified propulsion."

Lastly, we spoke about the vehicles that didn't sell the way Davis thought they might.

Here are the hits he missed:

"The first on my list of the Porsche Cayenne. Who would ever have thought that a Porsche owner would want an SUV? I thought: This great sports car brand, what are they doing? Of course, it became Porsche's most popular model. And everybody that owned a 911 wanted a companion, and it gave them a utility vehicle without them giving up the Porsche essence. So, really wrong about that one.

"The next one is the Mercedes-Benz CLA. I said, 'Who in the world would really want that?' Yeah, it's gorgeous, but the back seat is impractical. Maybe you could put children in it. I actually dubbed it the divorced

parent's weekend car. I had no idea that styling trend would catch on and become the four-door styling trend for everyone. So, I missed that one completely, too.

"I also didn't think the Jeep Patriot and Compass would end up being so popular. I really thought they were kind of lame when they came out. The interiors were not very good. But you know, it has turned out to be a very high-volume, steady vehicle for Jeep. And they are going to have a challenge to replace it with something as practical and affordable.

"Another big miss for me: The Toyota Avalon. Why would you want that? It's basically just a Camry with a little more length for a lot more money. What are you going to do, put all the geriatrics -- including myself at that point -- in it? Why do you need this car? I didn't recognize that the premium brands, Buick and Chrysler, were sort of fading.

"My last one is the Ford Transit Connect. I wasn't sure there was market for a small, odd looking front-wheel drive European van. And, of course, it has been a terrific success."

There were also a few vehicles Davis thought couldn't fail, but did anyway.

"The Renault Alliance, the savior for American Motors Corp. (chuckling). Also the Eagle Premier. We thought it was the most advance midsized front-wheel-drive sedan out there. We thought it would propel them to new heights. You know, that didn't happen.

"The Buick Reatta. I thought that was going to save the Buick brand. It was so far ahead of its time. It had the first real center-screen stack. We were worried about what would happen when it conked out, you couldn't replace it, but I thought that car would take off.

"The Honda Del Sol. I've always been a fan of little convertibles. It's a Civic with a removable top. But it's an airtight, watertight little machine. I thought that would take off."

“The GMC Envoy XUV, the one with the sliding roof. How practical can you get? Well, we all know what happened to that one.”

And finally there was one last miss that looks like it finally might be a hit: The five-door hatchback. Says Davis:

“The [late 1980s] Mazda 626 Touring Sedan. It was a great-driving car and it looked terrific. I thought this, finally, will get Americans into five-door hatchbacks. Well, that’s just barely starting to happen today. What we’ve done is pump them up, add all-wheel drive and call them crossover utilities. They are five-door hatchbacks. We had to Americanize them to make them popular, and that’s what we’ve done.”

No plans to slow down

Davis, who will be 68 in April, says he has no plans to slow down. He says he plans to remain the face of the show for the foreseeable future while grooming new talent to take over. The show, he said, is more popular than ever, but it will continue to change with the times. Davis says plans are in place to begin producing Web-only content.

“We’ve got to change and keep going. Five or six times over the years, we’ve taken the pieces out of the show and put them back in as more pithy or with new camera techniques. So, we have to keep up with visual technology.”

I’m going to borrow Davis’ trademark phrase that he closes his show with each week: “We’ll see you next time.