

Talkin' 'bout an auto revolution

Sharon Aschalek
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If the electric car ever goes mainstream, it will probably be because of Ian Clifford.

The 46-year-old head of Toronto-based Zenn Motor Company (ZENN is an acronym for “zero emissions, no noise”) is developing a fully functional electricity-fuelled vehicle that’s on track to make the biggest inroads in this currently niche market.

“If we introduce a car that’s as good as or better than the ones it replaces, the belief is that consumer demand will follow,” Clifford says.

Due out late in 2009, the CityZENN will have a top speed of 125 km/h and a range of 400 kilometres. And, once plugged into a regular outlet, it will recharge in fewer than five minutes.

As well, the CityZENN’s approximately \$30,000 price tag will make it competitive with internal combustion engine vehicles.

What will give the CityZENN a better chance at success than its much-storied but less-practical predecessors, particularly GM’s 1996 EV¹, is the ultra-capacitor – the compact and energy-efficient revolutionary new battery that’s projected to overshadow all others.

Currently under development by Texas-based company EES², the battery is expected, after a few years of delays, to be ready in 2009.

“EES’s battery will be a truly disruptive technology, because it is such a dramatic improvement over any existing chemical battery, so it will eclipse everything else on the market,” Clifford says.

In 2006, ZENN bought all the automotive rights to the ultra-capacitor – exclusive, worldwide, perpetual rights for four-wheel vehicles. The company also has a 3.8% stake in EES; the only way for investors to bet on the otherwise privately-held company is to buy ZENN stock on the TSX.

Given this advantage, ZENN Motor Company, which has a factory in Quebec, is poised to become the dominant player in this emerging market. One analyst projects that a functional ultra-capacitor could generate \$2 billion in annual revenue for the company by 2013.

“I can’t emphasize enough how excited we are about this opportunity – it’s really a perfect storm of

conditions for a company like ours. This is going to be a really significant transformation,” Clifford says.

Clifford has been preparing to seize this moment since 2001, when he started his company. Back then, automakers were swimming in SUV profit, but Clifford, at that time the head of a successful Internet marketing company, saw the writing on the wall.

“I saw a combination of both environmental degradation and the finite nature of petroleum as leading to the inevitability that this innovation would happen,” he says. “If we look at what’s been happening in the North American auto industry recently, I would guess the automakers are wishing they were doing this planning when I started my company.”

In 2006, ZENN released its first product, a low-speed vehicle that looks and operates a lot like a regular car, but goes up to 40 km/h. The vehicle is legal in 45 American states, as well as in Quebec and parts of B.C. Ontario hasn’t yet approved it, although in January 2009, Premier Dalton McGuinty announced he’ll back a U.S. company seeking to build battery recharging stations in the province for electric cars.

Clifford acknowledges that getting such stations implemented across the country will be a challenge, but he says the infrastructure will gradually evolve as driver demand and habit kicks in.

Meanwhile, Clifford’s also got his eye on what he sees as the big prize: selling EEstor-powered drive systems to other automakers.

“I’m a little guy; I don’t want to be a vehicle manufacturer or distributor. We’re following the Intel Inside model,” says Clifford, referring to the chip that powers 75% of the world’s computers. “That’s what we’re going for – making our solution the industry standard.”

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