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# GM scales down resort event for fleet buyers

By Max Jarman and Sharon Silke Carty, USA TODAY

CHANDLER, Ariz. — Dozens of potential General Motors (GM) customers were wilting in the desert heat in a parking lot at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa earlier this week. They ostensibly were looking at new cars but mostly just for shade.

They were among 500 fleet buyers — folks who work for rental car companies, government agencies, businesses that buy heavy-duty trucks, and companies that run fleets of vehicles for their workers — that GM was hosting at the resort this week.

GM says these buyers are key to their business. The automaker sold 866,000 vehicles to such customers last year, and says this event is intended to reach out to them and make sure they don't jump to rivals such as Ford or Toyota.

Guests are being treated to two nights lodging at the upscale resort, where the average room goes for \$300 per night. Steve Harris, head of public relations for GM, says the automaker paid less than \$250 for each room.

Other events hosted by other companies on government life-support have enraged taxpayers and members of Congress. In October, insurer AIG inflamed the public when it treated executives to a \$440,000 getaway at the St. Regis Resort near Laguna Beach, Calif.

Image is everything in this environment, says Leslie Paige, media director for Citizens Against Government Waste, and GM should have thought of that. "It seems to me this would be an obvious thing, that they would say, 'This is not a normal year, we are in extraordinary circumstances, and this year we will skip,' " Paige says. "One wonders what the heck is going through their minds."

## 'Fun stuff' gone

The hotel, decorated in earth tones, is in the middle of the Gila River Indian reservation. While the facility is a four-star resort, it doesn't feel as swank as a Ritz-Carlton.

GM declined to give the cost of the 2010 Fleet & Commercial Product Preview, but says it's significantly less than last year, when it was at the Red Rock Casino Resort in Las Vegas. Before that, GM had the event in Nashville.

GM says this year's event is scaled down. That means no free golf or joy riding at the nearby Bondurant School of High Performance Driving racetrack. Attendees dined on barbecue chicken and beans, and found the traditionally well-stocked hospitality suite closed.

"They took out all of the fun stuff," says Jim Corazza, who is in charge of fleet sales at Fairway Chevrolet in Hazleton, Pa.

Customers from businesses such as Shell and organizations such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were being flown into Phoenix in two waves to preview the 2010 lineup of GM cars and trucks.

They're able to see and test-drive vehicles that could be on their shopping lists, but also take a spin in fun cars such as the new Chevy Camaro.

"I just hope that people understand that this is a consumer-facing event done in the most efficient way we can with virtually no frills around it," GM's Harris says.

Because of its financial problems this year, he says GM has dropped out of a lot of sponsorships that don't result in direct customer contact. It didn't sponsor the Academy Awards, the NCAA Final Four or the Super Bowl. It also reduced its

involvement with NASCAR and Major League Baseball, and has dropped dealer-incentive trips.


Helio Fred Garcia, a professor of crisis communications at New York University, says GM has a point, within reason. It's important for the automaker to stay in touch with its customers, he says. But he questions whether GM should have considered doing something else.

"Isn't there some other way that at least doesn't look like the things people have already labeled as stupid?" he says. "My instinct is, I would probably advise a client to find some other way to be in a relationship with those stakeholders."

*Jarman writes for The Arizona Republic. He reported from Chandler; Carty, from Detroit*

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