

Michelin N.A. pushing Pax service out to dealer network

By Bruce Davis and Sigmund J. Mikolajczyk

Tire Business staff

PLYMOUTH, Mich.—To support the standard fitment of its Pax run-flat tire/wheel system on the 2005 Honda Odyssey Touring, Michelin North America Inc. and Honda North America Inc. have joined forces.

The two companies are making sure all 1,020 Honda and about 200 selected Michelin dealership locations in North America are equipped with a new replacement Pax unit—as well as the equipment needed to service the system on the minivan.

The tire maker also said it is boosting its standard tire warranty on Pax to include replacement for road hazards during the first two years or 50 percent of tread wear coverage at no charge.

Michelin said it seeks to keep Odyssey owners satisfied by providing quick repair or replacement of Pax system tires through a “multi-tiered service program.”

Each Honda dealership location will have on hand a Pax system “hatbox,” or a complete, ready-to-use Pax tire/wheel unit, the company added.

Odyssey owners requiring tire service can locate the nearest service site by calling (877) 729-8473.

When a customer brings in an Odyssey with a flat, Honda dealers will remove the Pax system assembly from the vehicle, replace it with the system from the hatbox, inflate the new tire and send the customer on his or her way, Michelin said.

The used Pax assembly will then be placed in the recyclable hatbox and returned to Michelin for inspection and analysis and a new hatbox then

will be delivered to the dealership.

At a recent Pax ride-and-drive demonstration in Plymouth, Mich., Don Baldwin, director of technical marketing for Michelin’s automotive industry division, its OE unit in Detroit, told journalists and original equipment customers that Pax is “changing the way the industry is



The Business photos by Sigmund J. Mikolajczyk

Fred Ison, a regional coordinator with McCourt Industries, uses Corghi equipment to mount a Pax tire/wheel assembly. He’s photographed through a Pax plastic inner liner.

looking at the tire/wheel combo. We’ve re-invented the tire.”

The tire maker has taken what could be a serious automotive incident—a blown or flat tire—and turned it into “a minor service inconvenience,” he said.

Equipped with a Pax tire/wheel system, a vehicle can travel 125 miles at speeds up to 55 mph before a motorist has to get the flat tire serviced, Mr. Baldwin said, noting Michelin is offering 24-hour national support for Pax.

A dozen or so vehicle manufacturers will be offering or are set to offer the system in the next few years, he added. Nissan North America Inc., which earlier had said it would offer Pax on 2005 model year vehicles, has postponed that fitment until next year, Michelin



Paul Gerrard, with E-motion, a professional driving group, said a deflated Pax tire still retains about 75 percent of its grip.

spokesmen said.

As he pointed to a hole that had been blown in a Pax sidewall with an explosive charge prior to a driving demonstration, Paul Gerrard, with E-motion, a professional driving group, claimed a deflated Pax tire/wheel still provides approximately 75 percent of the tire's grip.

The 200-plus authorized Michelin dealership service locations nationwide will provide more traditional repair or replacement of Pax system tires, Michelin said. In addition, Michelin will rely on its 34 TCI Tire Centers L.L.C. distribution points to supply the remainder of the Michelin dealer network with Pax hatboxes as needed.

Dealers will be able to service Pax assemblies by purchasing a Pax tire changer accessories kit—at an average cost of from \$1,000 to \$1,200—that will fit all Corgi equipment and some Coats, Hunter and Accu-Turn units as well, according to Keith Towers, Michelin North America manager of aftermarket service. The cost will depend on what machinery a dealer uses, he said, cautioning that it could cost up to \$4,500.

The kits are available from several sources in the U.S., including Corgi S.p.A., Accu Industries Inc. and Hunter Engineering Co.

Dan DeLoss, director of national accounts with Akron-based McCourt Industries, U.S. importer of Corgi equipment, estimated that approximately 65 percent of the tire-changing equipment on the market today can be retrofitted to service Pax, and all Corgi units are Pax-compatible. He said Corgi's Artiglio Master unit is used by Michelin to mount all its Pax assemblies in Greenville, S.C.

which cannot be repaired if punctured.

Any car or tire dealership needing a replacement Pax tire/wheel will get a new one, a Michelin official said. "We don't use used wheels." And if a customer traveling through Yellowstone Park, for instance, needs a new Pax, he said Michelin has made arrangements to get a new Pax tire/wheel anywhere in the country within 12 hours or less. Motorists will get a booklet with their vehicle that lists all Pax contact information and participating dealers.

Michelin also disclosed the latest Pax version uses a polyurethane inner support ring that shaves nearly a pound of weight per wheel from the previous rubber ring while offering 17-percent more load-bearing capacity.

The development is the result of work with Dow Chemical Co., which

has been working on the reaction injection molded support ring at its Freeport, Texas, site for the last three years. The polyurethane product is intended to support a completely flat tire on a car driven at up to 55 mph for 125 miles.

Ken Payne, who heads up the Honda group for Michelin, said the Pax tire costs about 10 percent more than a comparable conventional tire while the Pax wheel is 10-15 percent more than an equivalent-size wheel.

Mr. Chubb said Michelin has put about 16 million miles on Pax test assemblies in the field. Acknowledging the system increases a vehicle's unsprung weight—a "weight penalty," he called it—he said "that's why we have to do a collaborative design with vehicle makers. And that's why you probably won't see great growth

in aftermarket Pax applications."

Asked how long development of the tire maker's ZP run-flat tire and Pax will parallel, Mr. Chubb said it could be some time since the ZP application "is working well and may be a better alternative than Pax" on some vehicles.

As a testimony to the benefits of Pax, Mr. Payne told *Tire Business* of an incident where a limousine hit a patch of roofing nails that had spilled onto a highway. "The limo driver finished the run and delivered his passengers," Mr. Payne said, "and he was simply amazed."



An explosive charge on a Pax assembly mounted on a new Honda Odyssey minivan (above) blows a hole in the sidewall, leaving a frayed puncture (below).

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Mr. Baldwin said Michelin's goal is to grow the independent dealer Pax servicing network by "making sure we have adequate geographic coverage and that dealers have the knowledge and are proficient with the system." Within a few years, he predicted every major dealer should have the capability to service Pax.

The boosted warranty coverage is modeled after the assurance plan already in use with its Zero Pressure (ZP) tire fitments on the Dodge Viper and Cadillac XLR, Michelin said.

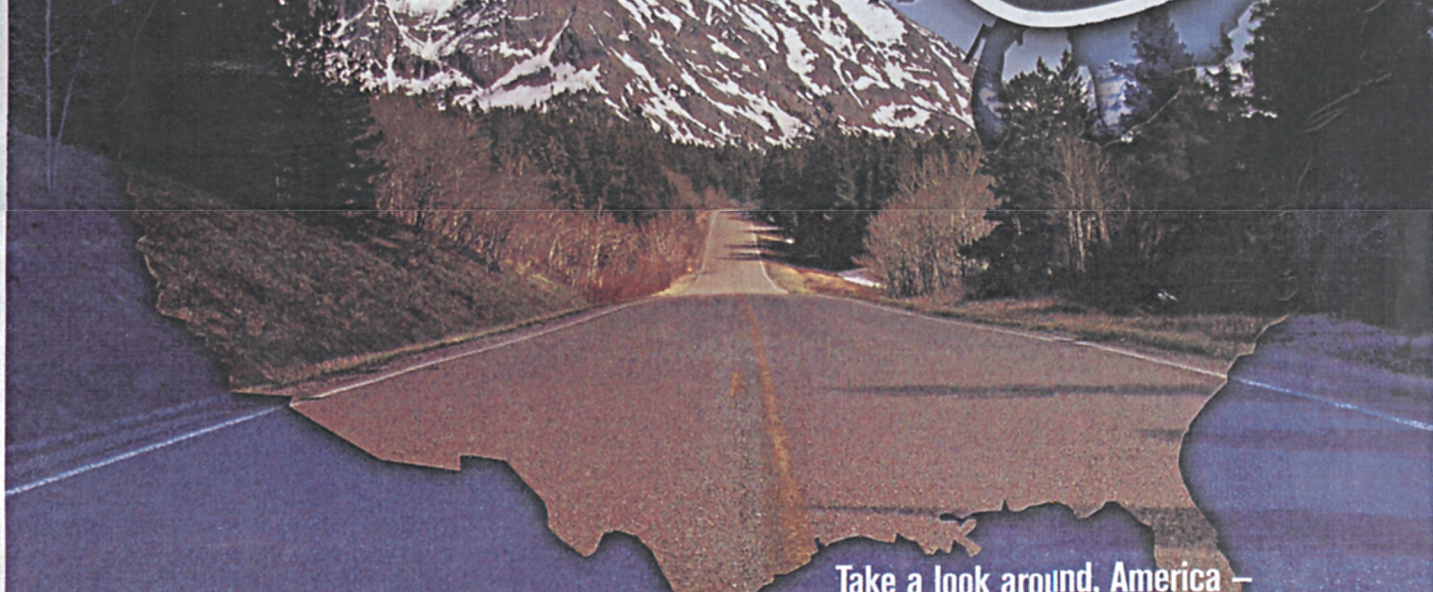
During a technical presentation in Plymouth, Mr. Baldwin said, "Consumers are ready for an alternative to the flat-changing experience. Pax is ready to offer the ultimate compromise: No compromise.

"And the beauty of Pax is you don't have to compromise your driving experience."

During the event, Michelin had on hand the Pax-equipped Honda Odyssey Touring, an Audi A8 and a Ford Explorer retrofitted with Pax-mounted wheels. However, officials were quick to point out the sport-utility vehicle is not available with the system—the tire maker was merely demonstrating that it could be some day.

"As more vehicles take to the road with the Pax system, the traditional service and repair networks will continue to grow with them," said Tom Chubb, vice president of marketing for Michelin Automotive Industries Division. "We are committed to taking care of our Pax system customers and all those new Honda Odyssey Touring owners."

Pax system tires can be repaired using standard Rubber Manufacturers Association methods and materials and returned to service, Michelin said, unlike some self-supporting tires,



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