MARCH AUTO SALES SHORT OF FORECASTS

GM & NISSAN GAIN; MOST ARE DOWN

U.S. sales of cars and light trucks were only 1.55 million, down 1.7% from a year ago, for a seasonally adjusted annual rate of sales (SAAR) that his only 16.6 million units. That was well below the forecasts that came out last week putting SAAR around 17.2 million. Clearly the auto sales boom is losing steam—although demand for pickups and SUVs remains strong, despite gas prices creeping up.

General Motors was a notable exception to the March downturn, with VP of sales Kurt McNeil hailing Chevrolet’s “unique three-truck pickup strategy and a dominant position in large SUVs.” Total unit sales were up 1.6% for GM to 256,224. Buick, driven by crossovers, saw sales rise 15.1% and GMC was up 12.0%. Cadillac was down 1.5% and Chevy 2.2%.

Nissan Group also had a strong month, gaining 3.2% for an all-time March record of 168,832. The Infiniti up 32.6% and Nissan 0.5%. The sales growth was powered by crossovers, trucks and SUVs.

Volkswagen AG continued to rebound, with sales up 2.7% to 51,068. The flagship Volkswagen brand gained 2.7%, with Porsche up 3.6%, Audi 1.7% and Bentley 109%. Subaru had another big month, with sales up 15.3% to 54,871.

Ford Motor Company, however, saw sales drop 7.2% to 234,895. Lincoln slipped 1.4%, while Ford dropped 7.4%. The company noted that F-Series pickup sales rose 10%.

March sales dropped 4.6% for Fiat Chrysler to 191,566. Dodge was up 9.7%, led by the Journey crossover, and the Ram truck brand rose 6.1%. The tiny Alfa Romeo nameplate gained more than 1,000. But Fiat was down 5.3%, Jeep 11.2% and Chrysler 33.1%.

American Honda noted the best March ever for its trucks, but total sales were off 0.7% to 137,227. Honda was up 1.8%, but Acura fell 21.3%.

Toyota Motor Sales declined 2.1% to 215,224, with Toyota down 1.2% and Lexus down 7.5%. Hyundai-Kia was off 11.2% to 118,694. Hyundai (adjusted for the Genesis brand spin-off) was down 8.0% and Kia dropped 15.2%.

In addition to VW, the other German brands did well. BMW Group was up 3.5% to 36,002, with Mini up 4.7% and BMW 3.3%. Daimler AG gained 2.0% to 32,352, with Mercedes-Benz up 2.3% and Smart down 18.8%.

Among smaller makers, Mazda was up 4.9%, Mitsubishi 6.2% and Jaguar Land Rover 18.9% (although Land Rover was down). Volvo was down 21.9%.

Kelley Blue Book reported that the average transaction price was $34,342 in March. That was up 1.7% ($587) from a year ago, but down 0.4% ($133) from February.

ADVERTISER NEWS

As the baseball season begins, Coca-Cola will become a corporate sponsor of Major League Baseball, replacing Pepsi. Coke has had the majority of MLB team sponsorship deals for several years but because of Pepsi’s deal with MLB, Coke did not have access to MLB’s digital and social media assets. Pepsi’s Gatorade remains an MLB sponsor for its segment of the beverage industry. Tesla worldwide sales were 25,000 vehicles in the first quarter, a 60% increase over the total from last year’s first three months. The Model 3, a smaller version of the Model S, arrives later this year priced around $35,000. Ally Financial is launching an online auto financing scheme called Clearlane this week which can connect national, regional and local lenders with consumers who want to finance or re-finance a vehicle. The concept would be that customers find the vehicle they want on a dealer’s website, get financing through Clearlane, and finalize the purchase at the dealership. Panera is introducing a new line of non-carbonated craft beverages made with no artificial sweeteners, preservatives, flavors or colors. The rollout starts this week in selected markets and should be nationwide by September. Publix initially launched a sub-brand called GreenWise ten years ago geared towards organic and natural foods, but the chain has only grown to three stores in that time. Now, however, it will open the first new GreenWise since 2008 next year and says it’s aggressively looking for additional potential GreenWise locations. New York state-based Tops Markets says it grew market share in its footprint during the fourth quarter, but profit dropped due to aggressive promotional activity, deflation, and a reduction in federal funding for the SNAP program (which accounts for about 10% of Tops’ business). Same-store sales were down 1.9% for the quarter. Walgreens, Rite Aid and Fred’s are all due to issue quarterly reports this week with observers hoping commentary might offer some late insight on the muddled merger proposal that has now been pending for much more than a year. The Wall Street Journal says investors “are growing increasingly uneasy that the deal, heavily scrutinized by regulators, could fall apart.” It’s also feared management attention directed towards the merger may have had a downward effect on current business at the chains. England’s Reckitt Benckiser says it’s starting a strategic review of its food division, a small part of the company’s overall business which is tilted towards cleaning and health brands. French’s mustard is its most notable food brand name, and there’s some speculation Kraft-Heinz, which recently was spurned in an effort to take over Unilever, could be a potential buyer.
CABLENET CHATTER

ARAMC has announced the season three premiere of Fear the Walking Dead will air on the network on Sunday, June 4th at 9 PM (ET). The announcement was made as the mega-hit The Walking Dead finished its current season. The first half of season three will air eight episodes over six weeks, with two back-to-back episodes on Sunday, June 4th and a mid-season finale on Sunday, July 9th. Hollywood Medium With Tyler Henry will return to E! on Wednesday, May 17th at 8 PM (ET). Henry is one of Hollywood’s most sought after mediums and will sit down with Tanya Thicke, Alan Thicke’s widow just months after Alan’s death due to heart complications. Additional celebrities meeting with Henry include, Khloe Kardashian, Jenna Dewan Tatum, Eva Longoria, Reza Farahan, Ice-T, Elisha Cuthbert, and many others. The producers and managers of Destination America’s Mountain Monsters have set an April premiere date for their next season. Destination America’s general manager Jane Latman said in a release, “As the team jumps back into investigating monsters like they do best, their personal relationships and group dynamics will be tested in the most epic battle of man versus beast yet.” Mountain Monsters’ new season will debut on Saturday, April 8th at 10 PM (ET) with the first of a two-part premiere. The second half of the premiere will air on Saturday, April 15th. Comcast NBCUniversal announced that it has awarded approximately $20,000 in scholarships for the 2017-18 school year to 12 Vermont students as part of its annual Leaders and Achievers Scholarship Program. The program is funded by the Comcast Foundation and recognizes the best and brightest high school seniors for their community service, academic performance and leadership skills. Investigation Discovery will air two original newsmagazines in April with two of America’s leading journalists. Scene of the Crime with Tony Harris will air a sneak peek on Sunday, April 9th at 10 PM (ET), immediately following Casey Anthony: An American Murder Mystery. It will then move to its regular time-slot of Sunday’s at 10 PM (ET). The Real Story with Maria Elena Salinas, the anchor for Univision, will feature stories behind national headline-making crimes in search of new evidence, unheard perspectives, and updates to well known cases. The Real Story with Maria Elena Salinas will premiere on Investigation Discovery on Monday, April 24th at 10 PM (ET). Popular Donald Trump impersonator Anthony Atamanuik is getting his own show on Comedy Central. The network says The President Show will air on Thursday’s following The Daily Show with Trevor Noah beginning on April 27th at 11:30 PM (ET). Atamanuik will host along with his sidekick, Vice President Mike Pence, played by impersonator Peter Grosz. AT&T Audience Network released joint statement with Endemol Studios announcing that the third season of the mixed martial arts drama Kingdom will be the last. Actor Jonathan Tucker, who plays Jay Kulina on the series tweeted, “could not have been prouder to have been a part of it.” The final season of Kingdom kicks off on AT&T Audience Network on May 31st.

COMCAST PREPAID NOW SYSTEM-WIDE

Comcast is now making its Xfinity Prepaid Internet Service available throughout its service footprint. The pay-as-you go offering lets customers access the Xfinity broadband service without a credit check or annual contract. After purchasing the starter kit, service can be purchased on a seven-day or 30-day basis. Comcast began offering prepaid Internet last year through a partnership with Boost Mobile. More than 800 Boost Mobile stores are now participating and that is expected to expand to all 4,000-plus stores by the end of this year. Comcast is also selling the service online and at select Xfinity stores.

What about prepaid cable TV? Comcast says that is coming later this year as well across the entire footprint. Xfinity Prepaid Video Service is currently offered in only a few select markets. The basic service, with 45 channels, costs $80 for the starter kit, including 30 days of service, with refills costing $15 for seven days or $45 for 30. An upgraded version with over 140 channels costs about twice as much.

VERIZON INTO STREAMING NEXT?

We reported yesterday on Comcast’s OTT plans, but Bloomberg reports Verizon may be selling an online TV service including dozens of channels as early as this summer. The new plan would be different from Verizon’s small ad-supported go90 streaming service, as well as a different service from FiOS. It’s noted however that many of the FiOS contracts did give Verizon streaming rights, so additional retransmission fees for a new service might not be necessary.

FROM THE NIELSEN TOTAL AUDIENCE REPORT

Based on the total U.S. population, the time spent on live television vs. DVR/Time-shifted TV has changed very little in the last couple of years, and, even though most people are spending much more time consuming media on smartphones, total television viewing’s decline has been miniscule. In the fourth quarter of 2014, the average time spent was 4 hours, 31 minutes of live TV and 31 minutes of DVR/time-shifted and in 2015’s fourth quarter the respective numbers were 4:27 and 0:32. In last year’s fourth quarter an average of 4:23 was spent on live TV with 33 minutes on DVR/time shifted for a net loss of just six minutes of total TV viewing in two years. The viewing held up well despite an increase from 1:02 to 2:32 for time spent on a smartphone for apps or the web in the same two years.

Television (including live and time-shifted) is still the reach leader of any medium. In Nielsen’s Total Audience Report for the fourth quarter, TV reached 292.7 million persons 2+ monthly (203 million of whom did use time-shifting to some degree). Radio was runner-up at 266.4 million. Other measured media choices were: DVD/Blu-Ray, 104.9 million, Game console, 86.7 million; Multimedia device, 105.7 million; Internet on a PC, 179.2 million; Video on a PC, 116.9 million; App/Web on a smartphone, 206.9 million; and video on a smartphone, 168.0 million.