

The electric cars most likely to succeed

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The crystal ball is still cloudy on electric and plug-in hybrid cars. They're still being made in limited numbers, and delivered to very specific test markets. And half the really exciting ones aren't even here yet. Still, it's time to make some predictions about what will succeed and what will fail in the marketplace.

Here are my top leading candidates, in descending order:

1. Chevy Volt: GM's \$41,000 plug-in hybrid, soon to have a sister car in the more upscale Cadillac ELR (first seen on the auto show circuit as the Converj in 2009). GM has sold 3,200 so far, but the number doesn't have much to do with demand - production's been shut down as the company gears up for a capacity of 60,000 a year by 2012.
2. [Toyota Prius](#) plug-in hybrid: With an all-electric range of nine to 13 miles, after which it's a regular [Prius](#), this car should find a lot of fans.
3. Nissan Leaf: Some 4,000 have been sold so far in the U.S., and East Coast customers are still waiting patiently. The price is going up for 2012 - to \$38,000 for the SL trim that most customers will want.
4. Tesla Model S: Due next year, this \$49,990 electric sedan is half the price of the exotic Roadster, but it has far more utility. On the same platform, Tesla will also offer a Model X crossover that should sell really well.
5. Ford C-Max Energi plug-in hybrid: There is now downside to plug-in

hybrids, except maybe their price. This one is headed for the market in 2012, and with 500 miles of range it should be a really practical, fun-to-own car.

6. Ford Focus electric/Toyota RAV4 electric (tie): Take your pick. The 2012 Focus is an electric version of the redesigned Focus small car, best used as a city car with an 80-mile range. It should offer good performance - celebrities raced them on Jay Leno's show. The RAV4 is being built with Tesla, and it continues the electric career of the popular crossover (which was briefly on the market around the turn of the millennium as a competitor for the GM EV1).

7. Fisker Karma: After many delays, the Karma is finally on the market, or at least the first set of keys has been handed to Leonardo DiCaprio, with Colin Powell and Al Gore in the wings. The Karma is a \$100,000 plug-in hybrid with Italian supercar good looks (though the BMW veteran designer is actually a Dane). This car has serious glamour going for it, but it has to perform up to the hype.

8. Honda Fit/Toyota iQ city electrics (tie): I love subcompacts, and they make great bases for inexpensive electric cars. These two (both headed for production in 2012) should be evenly matched, and go head to head. I'm really hoping for low prices on these two cars - under \$30,000 would be nice, even if it means a smaller battery pack and less than 100 miles of range.

9. BMW i3 Megacity Vehicle: BMW was an early player in the space with its lively Mini-based electric vehicles, and its successor, a plug-in version of the 1-Series. The 2013 BMW i3 is the company's first all-electric platform, and it's headed for the road in the world's super-crowded cities (hence the name). The concept makes sense, since that's where the world's population is headed, but only if the price is kept low enough so the middle class (instead of just the super-rich) can afford it.

10. Porsche 918 Spyder plug-in hybrid: Speaking of the super-rich, this car will cost \$845,000. Porsche will build just 918 of them when it debuts on Sept. 18, 2013. (They're into numerology at Porsche.) But even if they sell only a few of them, at that price the company will make money - and reap acres of publicity and the cover of every car magazine.

This list is subject to periodic updates, of course, but this is how I see it now. I predict both the [Chevy Volt](#) and the Nissan Leaf will sell in sufficient numbers to make them, if not runaway hits, at least modest successes. They have the greatest consumer awareness, the most utility, the best pricing and are supported by solid dealer and promotional bases. The Fisker Karma and the [Tesla](#) Model S are also likely to do well, though both will need to meet high quality and performance standards to stay afloat.

I'm bullish about the [Ford Focus](#) electric (which will benefit from the company's strong reputation and marketing clout) and the BMW Megacity Vehicle (for the same reasons). Audi could do well with limited numbers of high-end performance-oriented electric and plug-in hybrid cars, as could Porsche. I especially like Daimler's A-Class battery car, though it may not appear in the U.S. or become a regular commercial entry. Chrysler/Fiat's 500 electric may also be a very small, image-burnishing program.

A number of other cars face a tougher time in the market. The Smart car has had a troubled run in the American marketplace, and its "electric drive" version hit the showrooms with a high lease price. A new version is coming, and with Mercedes alone in control it might be a huge improvement. Like Smart, Think (which just survived a near-death experience and now has a Russian owner) has an inherent two-seater limitation, plus a relatively high price. The new owner needs to lower the price, and maybe offer the battery pack in a separate lease offer.

Coda has many hurdles, from a high price to plain-Jane styling. Most of its original executives (including the high-flying CEO, Kevin Czingler) have left, and it's on indefinite hiatus. Wheego's ace in the hole is Mike McQuary's can-do attitude and very low overhead, so it could make it with sales of a few thousand cars a year.

China's BYD, which intends to import both a battery electric and a plug-in [hybrid](#), has a good chance of making it in the U.S. if it keeps prices low, and brings quality, design and safety up to Western standards (big if). Aptera, well, that one requires a leap of faith. The company, which just returned deposits to customers, is highly dependent on a federal Department of Energy loan that is a bit of a long-shot. But Aptera insists it's still a viable enterprise. But isn't that Aptera's dashboard on the DOE home page?

My list is a snapshot in time, capturing a moment in a fast-moving terrain.

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