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## Opinion: Radio Flyer is pimpin' its wagons

The Cloud 9 concept wagon marries technology with a childhood icon Lucas Mearian

October 27, 2008 (Computerworld) Few toys scream Americana more than a little red Radio Flyer wagon being pulled behind a kid in Smalltown, U.S.A. It's one of those icons that you just didn't expect to change all that much, even with all the technological advances of our times. Simple just seems better sometimes.

While you can still purchase the all-metal, hard rubber-wheeled original red wagon from Chicago-based Radio Flyer Inc., the company has gone upscale with most of its models, and its latest concept pull-along -- "The Cloud 9 Wagon" -- could set you back almost \$1,000 if it were ever built. That's because it features reclining upholstered seats, cup holders, rear and side storage compartments, a sun visor, and an MP3 player adapter with stereo speakers.

Today's luxury model wagons are no longer made of stamped steel but of polyethylene, and finishes are approaching that of a car. Radio Flyer wagons come with inflatable tires that spin on ball bearings instead of plain steel rods. The company's target audience is no longer that Rockwellian kid in a straw hat and overalls. Its product now competes with high-end strollers and baby carriages.

Among 50 other products, such as tricycles and rocking horses, Radio Flyer has been making its toy wagons for more than 90 years, and for much of that time its plain, flatbed wagon had been among its most popular.

But times change, and so has Radio Flyer.

They're much more like the minivan of wagons than the old traditional little red wagon we remember when we grew up as kids. Tom Schlegel, vice president of product development at Radio Flyer

Unlike the one-room woodworking shop where the first Radio Flyer was turned out 91 years ago, today a team of 15 designers use electronic drawing tablets and computer-aided design programs to create three-dimensional images that are downloaded to robotic lathes that quickly fashion prototypes in a fraction of the time it would take an assembly line to do it.

"We've just seen over the last several years how the wagon has changed from a utility toy that you would maybe get in and ride down the driveway ... to a 'kid transporter,' where it's more about taking your kids to the fun," said Tom Schlegel, vice president of product development at Radio Flyer. "They're much more like the minivan of wagons than the old traditional little red wagon we remember when we grew up as kids."

Radio Flyer's Cloud 9 Wagon sports safety features that you'd expect to see in a motorized vehicle, such as seats with five-point harnesses and a parking brake on the handle.



Radio Flyer's Cloud 9 concept wagon

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"The Cloud 9 concept wagon is kind of like the concept car you'd see at an auto show," Schlegel said. "It's just taking those trends we're seeing now in our products to the extreme and looking into the future to see how far this trend could extend. It's more of a statement by us and to see what features and functions will resonate with customers."

Radio Flyer's current high-end model, <u>The Ultimate Family Wagon</u>, features five-way flip and fold seats that allow seating for two children with storage compartments, two child cup holders, two adult cup holders, a tray table for drawing or eating, and a flatbed area for more traditional hauling. A UV-protection canopy can be installed in seconds. The Ultimate Family Wagon retails for \$136.



Older Radio Flyer models

Click to view images of older Radio Flyer models.

Like so many iconic U.S. companies, Radio Flyer had humble beginnings. In 1917, the first hand-made wagon was built by founder and immigrant cabinet maker Antonio Pasin. It was a wooden model called the Liberty Coaster, after the Statue of Liberty. Ten years later, Pasin adopted the metal stamping and mass-production-line methods of the automobile industry for his wagons and created the first all-metal model naming it the Radio Flyer after his fascination with the invention of the radio by fellow Italian Guglielmo Marconi. In the mid-1930s, the Streak-o-lite became the company's first specialty wagon, modeled after the popular Zephyr train.

About five years ago, Radio Flyer came out with its first wagon with fold-down seats. The Pathfinder, as it was called, became the best selling wagon in the world and ushered in a new generation of Radio Flyer transports that have lead to today's Cloud 9 concept wagon, Schlegel said. And while the Cloud 9 will probably never see the light of day, according to Schlegel, the features it sports, such as the MP3 player and upholstered, reclining seats, are expected to be adopted in models coming out in fall of 2009.

Ah, how times change.