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Newest VW lacks USB, only iPhones welcome

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The 2015 Volkswagen Golf, one of the brand's most important vehicles, lacks a simple USB connection for phones and music devices, even though a significant number of shoppers considers that the most important feature a car can have.

The seventh-generation Golf won't get a USB plug until the 2016 models next year, VW says.

Meantime, the 2015s have only a so-called dongle with an Apple phone Lightning plug. That fits only the latest-generation iPhones, though it can be used with older iPhones via an obscure adapter.

Lack of an ordinary USB connection, which is all-but-standard on vehicles sold on the U.S., denies owners the full use of Android or Windows phones, and iPod-style music devices.

In a survey last month by Kelley Blue Book's kbb.com, a car-shopping and research site, car shoppers said they consider "USB/auxiliary ports" the No. 1 "must-have" feature in new cars. The USB/aux outpaced the likes of backup cameras (39%), Bluetooth (39%), premium sound system (33%) and collision sensors (25%) as the most-demanded feature.

VW's U.S. representatives say they have no good explanation for lack of a USB, and haven't gotten a full explanation yet from German headquarters.

Theoretically, then, the omission of such a simple feature means that more than four of every 10 shoppers could consider VW's feature omission a deal-breaker and move on to other models on their shopping lists.

VW needs none of that rejection.

VW-brand sales the first half are down 13.4% from last year's tally, well under-performing the U.S. new-vehicle market, which is up 4.3% the first six months this year.

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If, indeed, the lack of a simple USB plug further undercuts VW sales by hobbling the Golf launch, it would spotlight a lack of understanding of the U.S. market. VW was slow to widely adopt backup cameras, even though almost as many shoppers demand that feature as they do USB plugs.

And the latest Golf has a small navigation/stereo info screen, about 5.7 inches diagonally at a time rivals' are bigger, for better visibility and easier touch-screen use. Honda Fit offers a 7-inch screen, for instance, Mini Cooper has one that's 8.8 inches.

"Tech will continue to become a bigger deal to shoppers," says kbb.com analyst Akshay Anand.

Non-Apple phones will link into the 2015 Golf's infotainment system via the Bluetooth wireless network, to stream phone calls or music wirelessly. But the lack of a hard-wire plug-in connection means the phone can't do other tasks, such as display their maps on the car's screen, or allow the car to fully control the phone's features.

And it means the driver has to charge a non-Apple phone by plugging it into a 12-volt outlet, which can be less convenient than using a built-in USB that allows both charging the device and linking it with the car's features and controls.

GTI is the only version of the new Golf on sale in the U.S. First one left the showroom over Memorial Day weekend. Other versions come later this year.

The Gen-7 Golf has been sold overseas since late 2012. VW said it delayed a U.S. launch until it could shift production of the car from Germany to VW's Puebla, Mexico, factory, where it also makes the Jetta and Beetle for the U.S. and overseas markets.

The Gen-7 Golf is a little bigger than its predecessor, but weighs as much as 79 pounds less. Engines are more powerful, but mileage is better.

The GTI starts at $25,215, for the two-door, manual transmission model with 2-liter, 210-horsepower turbocharged gasoline four-cylinder engine. Power rises to 220 hp with the $1,495 Performance Package of features that also includes a limited-slip front differential and bigger brakes.

The standard Golf starts at $18,815. That's a "Launch Edition." Like the basic Golf, it's a two-door with manual and 1.8-liter, 170-hp, turbo four-cylinder. It's $1,000 less than what will become the base Golf, called "S," once sales are rolling.

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To keep the price down, Launch gets steel wheels instead of alloys, cloth seats instead of VW's V-Tex leatherette (vinyl) and lacks the Golf S Car-Net telematic system.

Golf TDI (VW's designation for its diesel) will start at $22,815, and is available only as a four-door. The diesel engine is a new design, though its specifications are similar to the TDI it replaces. It gets a 10-hp boost, to 150 hp, and has the same 236 lbs.-ft. of torque as the previous version.

VW is the world's third-largest automaker, behind Toyota and General Motors, and the Golf is VW's best-selling car worldwide, though a mid-pack seller among U.S. VWs.

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