

# Nissan opens testing plant, guarantees satisfaction

The Associated Press  
May. 29, 2007 02:06 PM

ZAMA, Japan - Like any auto plant, robots are whirring, swinging huge mechanical arms. Yet the assembly lines at Nissan's new Global Production Engineering Center are there for testing purposes only.

The nearly baseball-stadium-size building, shown to reporters Tuesday, is part of Nissan Motor Co.'s effort to work out possible kinks in production for the 30 new model launches Japan's No. 3 automaker is planning for this fiscal year through March 2008.

The new models are critical to Nissan's attempt to reverse its sliding sales, and the center's tests will be applied to all future global production.

And the new \$42 million center in Zama city, just west of Tokyo, which opened last year, is meant to ensure quality regardless of where the vehicles are being produced - whether that's in India, Russia or the United States.

"We are about to go on a major offensive," said Senior Vice President Toshiharu Sakai.

In the past, things have gone wrong in production, such as when a design for an auto part that looked right in its digital design stages turned out not to fit properly, he says. The testing center is meant to pre-empt such problems.

Nissan, which runs 26 vehicle plants around the world, has been producing more cars outside Japan than within since 2003.

Testing production in advance on mock assembly lines may help fine-tune production and improve product quality, says Shozo Takata, science and engineering professor at Waseda University.

"It could serve the purpose of separating problems at the design stage from problems at the production stage," he said in a telephone interview. "That tends to be meaningful."

Nissan has acknowledged that quality has sometimes suffered in recent years abroad, including its new U.S. plant in Canton, Mississippi. But Sakai and other Nissan officials are determined to catch potential glitches early in the game.

With 30 models going into production worldwide in 12 months, production for three or more models needs to be tested a month - quite a challenge for the center, Sakai said.

When problems are found, they are corrected. The new production schemes go to the plants, often as digital data.

The center also carries out test-drives in a room, where bumpy roads are simulated and temperatures are adjusted from freezing to tropical hot.

In one demonstration, a cockpit of a car, which includes the steering wheel, glove compartment and other front interior parts, was placed into the frame of a vehicle, to make sure it fit properly.

William Schwartz, Executive Vice President of TBM Consulting Group, which advises companies on production methods, says other Japanese automakers, including Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co., test out production methods for experimentation and changes before full-scale production.

"The goal of production preparation is to create the best method with the least amount of waste. Worker productivity is improved regardless of the country or culture," he said in an e-mail.

Nissan Executive Vice President Hidetoshi Imazu said the center helps cut the time for development and production preparation.

"It is important that Nissan maintains the high levels of quality that our customers expect," he said.