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Three phase power

Mazda3 is now a force to be reckoned with, but it still bows to the Corolla

By IAN PORTER

HAVING a small car in the range should have been a licence to print money over the past five years as Australia's love affair with large cars waned.

Honda, whose Civic volumes were crunched to fewer than 4000 vehicles a year in 2003, saw volumes race to more than 16,000 in 2008, helped by a switch to cheaper Thai-made cars. Still, that was "only" double the 8200 it sold in 1999.

For really strong growth, however, you need look no further than the Mazda3, a Japanese car that still arrives in Australia with a 'Made in Japan' stamp on its chassis.

In the 10 years from 1999, sales of the 323/Mazda3 have trebled from 10,230 to 33,755 units in 2008.

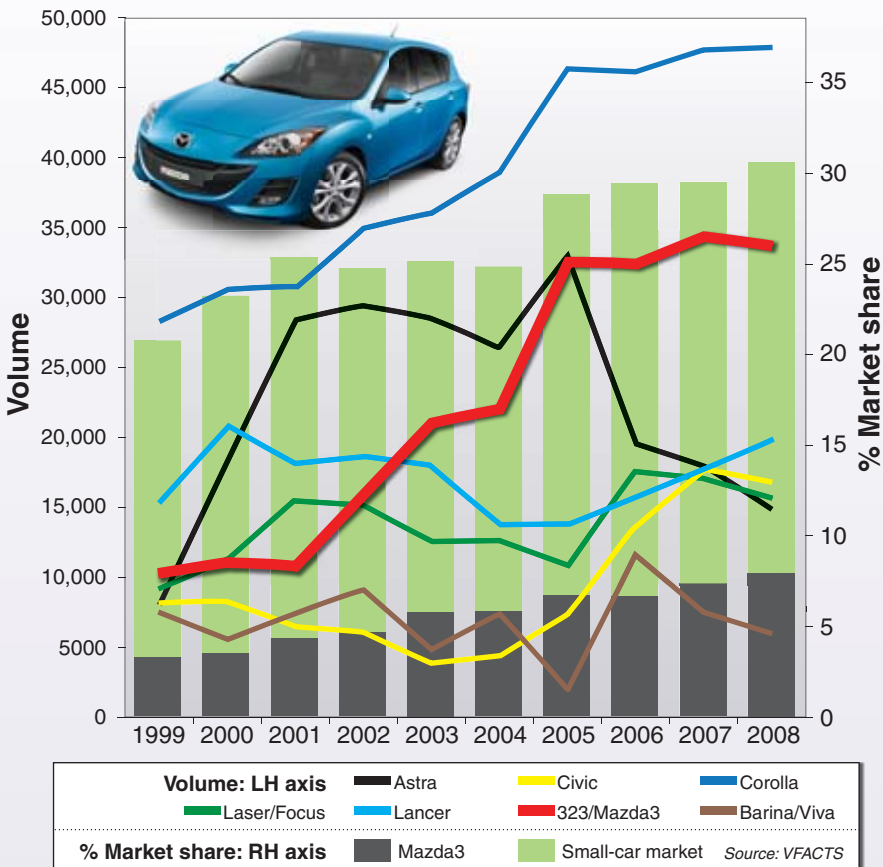
The 323 essentially carried the company through some trying financial times in the 1990s, and the constant demand in Australia, where the bulk of sales were retail deals at good margins, was a pillar of strength for the company.

There was some concern in 2003 when the 323 name was to be dropped in favour of Mazda3, as a lot of Mazda's success depended on repeat business.

"The 323 name had been around at that stage since 1978 - 25 years - and you build up a lot of loyalty with a nameplate that old," said Mazda Australia spokesman Glenn Butler. "But you also build up a lot of baggage."

"For Mazda, the mid- to late-1990s were pretty dark days and we needed to take some bold steps to put Mazda on the course to where it is today."

Unusually for a name change, sales



went up about five per cent to 22,000 in 2004, but Mazda Australia was frustrated.

"When you tell the factory you can sell 60 per cent more of the new model, they tend to look at you and laugh," Mr Butler said.

"It took us a while to convince the factory. That's why, in the second year, Mazda3 sales went straight up over 30,000 units."

But sales have never been strong enough to push the Mazda3 to small-car leadership in any one year. That title belongs to Toyota's ubiquitous Corolla.

However, all the moons aligned for

Mazda in January and, while there were falls across the market, the run-out Mazda3 sailed through to claim monthly leadership.

It was the first time any Mazda model had topped the national sales charts. It was a great way to start Mazda's 50th year of operations in Australia and bring up the 400,000th Australian sale for the 323/Mazda3 nameplates.

The bad news for the opposition is that Mazda is about to launch its second-generation version of the Mazda3, with a new body and refreshed mechanicals.

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