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[21767002]

Ford said yesterday it will halt imports of the Merkur Scorpio , a \$ 28,000 luxury sedan built by Ford of Europe in West Germany .

[21767003]

The cars are sold under a separate franchise with its own sign in front of Lincoln-Mercury dealers - as opposed to new models such as Taurus or Escort , which are sold under existing Ford divisions .

[21767005]

It will continue to be sold in the European market .

[21767007]

Still , Merkur 's demise is a setback for Ford at a time when the company 's image as the U.S. auto maker with the golden touch is showing signs of strain .

[21767008]

The No. 2 auto maker 's new Thunderbird and Mercury Cougar models have n't met sales expectations in the year since they were introduced , and Ford 's trucks are losing ground to their GM rivals .

[21767009]

This fall , Ford introduced only one new product : A restyled version of its hulking Lincoln Town Car luxury model .

[21767010]

The demise of Merkur (pronounced marc-COOR) comes after a September in which 670 Merkur dealers managed to sell only 93 Scorpions .

[21767011]

Total Merkur sales for the first nine months dropped 46 % from a year ago to just 6,320 cars .

[21767013]

The Japanese assault on the luxury market is rapidly overshadowing such European makes as Audi and Saab , which at least have clear brand images .

[21767014]

Merkur , as an import on domestic car lots , suffered from the same sort of image confusion that is hobbling sales of imports at General Motors Corp. and Chrysler Corp .

[21767016]

But the brand had trouble from the start .

[21767017]

The first Merkur , the XR4Ti , went on sale in early 1985 .

[21767018]

The sporty coupe foundered in part because American buyers did n't go for the car 's unusual double-wing rear spoiler .

[21767019]

In May 1987 , Ford began importing the Scorpio sedan from West Germany to sell next to a redesigned XR4Ti in showrooms .

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