



Tony Brown, second from right, says Ford wants to maintain minority-supplier support. Execs of suppliers in Ford's program include, from left, Gary Gonzalez of Gonzalez Production Systems, Andra Rush of Dakkota and Bill Pickard of Grupo Antolin Wayne.

Ford plan aids minority suppliers

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DETROIT — As vehicle sales fell in 2008, Ford Motor Co.'s spending with suppliers owned by minorities and women plunged 21 percent to \$3.3 billion. But the group maintained its 10 percent share of Ford's U.S. spending on parts, service and supplies from 2007 to 2008.

To maintain support for minority- and women-owned suppliers, Ford is working on a new program to give those companies more products and technology to sell.

Ford is sharing patents and technologies developed by Ford engineers with certain companies that then will try to bring the products to

market. The program should allow minority- and women-owned suppliers to at least maintain their share of Ford's business, said purchasing chief Tony Brown.

"The whole notion is to shift the playing field," Brown told *Automotive News*. "From a historical perspective, what's brought those businesses to where they are is competing on cost. Now how do we move it to the next level — and technology is the differentiator."

The program was launched in October with six companies. None has brought a Ford-invented product or process to market, but a few are getting closer, Brown said.

For instance, Gary Gonzalez, CEO

of Gonzalez Production Systems, is developing an ultrasonic welding technology that could be used to join two pieces of aluminum without rivets. Tests will begin at an unspecified time at Ford's Woodhaven, Mich., stamping plant on the hood for the Ford Mustang.

The technology, if proven, could be used beyond Ford. The automaker is encouraging its preferred suppliers to investigate purchasing opportunities with the minority- and women-owned companies involved in the program.

The products also could be sold to other automakers or outside the industry for a licensing fee paid to Ford. **AN**