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Oil company to promote green cars

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By: John Stewart

June 24, 2009 10:30 AM - Exxon Mobil Corp., the world's most profitable oil company, has teamed up with a small Mississauga battery-maker to promote the use of cars that do not consume a drop of petroleum.

Out of character, maybe, but officials from the Texas oil titan were in Baltimore Tuesday to launch a new car-share program called AltCar, which is composed of a fleet of 10 low-speed electric cars that will be rented to the public out of the Maryland Science Center.

The zero-emission cars, called the Maya-300, are the creation of ElectroVaya Inc. of Mississauga. The company, which has its corporate offices on Royal Windsor Dr., manufactures the lithium-ion battery packs that power the vehicles. They are assembled in Ontario.

But it's what lies inside those batteries that explains Exxon's role. The company's chemical division has produced a new kind of separator film or "membrane" that can increase the power, capacity and safety of lithium-ion batteries.

"Exxon wants to show it's a technology company," said Sankar Das Gupta, chairman and chief executive of ElectroVaya, who attended the Exxon-organized launch in Baltimore. For Exxon, the event amounted to good public relations for a company regularly criticized by environmentalists, but ElectroVaya shareholders had the most to gain.

Its stock soared 60 per cent, or 45 cents, yesterday to \$1.20 on the Toronto Stock Exchange. In the past month alone, shares jumped 275 per cent.

The program also gives good exposure to the five-door Maya-300, which sports a shell imported from China and has several safety features, including an airbag system. The electric car can drive up to 190 kilometres on a single charge with its speed capped at either 40 or 55 kilometres an hour, depending on local regulation.

Exxon put \$500,000 (U.S.) in the AltCar program. The money bought the vehicles from ElectroVaya and developed a science centre exhibit to showcase green vehicle technology. They will be rented in two-hour intervals for \$29.

"ExxonMobil is helping make vehicles more efficient," Jim Harris, a senior vice-president at ExxonMobil Chemical Co., said in a statement. "We believe that advances in technology are the solution to many of the toughest energy challenges."

The question is whether Exxon, which posted a jaw-dropping \$45.2 billion record profit in 2008, is serious about promoting electric vehicles, or is simply engaging in another "greenwashing" exercise to clean up its dirty public image.

Only recently did it accept the science behind global warming and stop funding groups that denied man-made climate change is occurring.

"Of all the oil companies to try and create a green sheen for themselves, Exxon is certainly to be the least likely to succeed," said Joel Makower, a corporate sustainability consultant and editor of the online news site GreenBiz.com.

"We are excited about the opportunity to participate with the Maryland Science Centre on the launch of this new all-electric vehicle," ElectroVaya's DasGupta said in a press release. "The Maya Electric demonstration program provides new and important experience about the usage of lithium ion battery technology and is an important step in the early growth of this industry."

"ElectroVaya is accelerating clean transportation solutions as a commercial reality with its advanced power systems for all classes of zero-emission electric vehicles and plug-in hybrid electric vehicles," Das Gupta added.

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Torstar Network
 Sankar Das Gupta, Chairman and CEO of ElectroVaya, sits in the driver's seat of a vehicle converted to electric inside his Mississauga business.

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