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G.M. Regains the Top Spot in Global Automaking

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DETROIT — After three years of settling for second place, General Motors reclaimed its title as the world's largest automaker in 2011, a year when its sales grew in every region of the globe while Toyota sales were hampered by major natural disasters.

G.M. said Thursday that it sold 9,025,942 vehicles last year, 7.6 percent more than in 2010. Its closest competitor was Volkswagen, whose sales grew 14 percent to 8.156 million, with Toyota falling to third place.

Toyota has not released final sales results for the year but last month it estimated that sales totaled 7.9 million vehicles, a 6 percent drop.

The industry's sales crown means little beyond bragging rights. But G.M.'s ability to climb back on top, only two years removed from its government rescue and bankruptcy, is certain to bolster morale within the company and strengthen the Obama administration's argument that its bailout of the industry was worthwhile. G.M. was the world's largest automaker for more than 70 years before Toyota surpassed it in 2008.

“Two years ago, nobody would have figured any of this would ever happen,” said Van E. Conway, chief executive of the turnaround consulting firm Conway MacKenzie, of Birmingham, Mich. “The intangible value of being No. 1 does have a positive impact, and it can feed on itself.”

Publicly at least, G.M. executives have been careful to avoid celebrating amid Toyota's struggles. Toyota only recently was able to return production to normal levels after the earthquake and tsunami in Japan last March caused major disruptions and parts shortages. “I want to win in the marketplace, but I want to win against a healthy and vibrant Toyota and Honda,” G.M.'s chief executive, Daniel F. Akerson, said in an interview last year. “Next year, we'll put the gloves back on, and I'm sure they'll go right back at us and we'll go back at them.”

G.M. chose not to highlight its first-place finish Thursday, burying its global sales figures at the bottom of an announcement about its Chevrolet brand selling a record 4.76 million cars and trucks last year.

At the Detroit auto show last week, Mr. Akerson said G.M.'s focus was on increasing profits and margins, but he acknowledged that rising sales were a positive indicator of the company's progress.

"We're not going to achieve the financial goals that we want to achieve and have declining market share or declining numbers of units sold," he told reporters. "It's one indicator. What's most important for our owners, our shareholders, is that we produce margins and profits and cash flow."

G.M. shares rose 31 cents Thursday, to \$24.82. They have risen 22 percent so far this month but remain well below the \$33 price from G.M.'s initial public offering in November 2010. The Treasury Department, which still owns about 26 percent of G.M., needs the shares to reach roughly \$54 to recoup its full investment in the company.

G.M., whose sales figures include its joint ventures in China, will need to continue increasing its sales to stay on top in the years ahead, if Toyota and Volkswagen are able to meet their ambitious forecasts. Toyota last month said it was aiming to sell 8.48 million vehicles in 2012 and nearly 9 million in 2013, not including some affiliate companies that are included in last year's 7.9 million figure. Volkswagen is setting a target of 10 million in annual sales by 2018.