Toyota, Microsoft Beef up Gazoo.com Net Service

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TOKYO (AP) — Toyota is teaming up with Microsoft for an Internet service that links cars, home computers and smartphones so users can find nearby tourist spots, connect on social networks and learn about new models.

The beefed up version of Toyota's Internet site Gazoo.com starts May 30 in Japan, and will be based on "cloud" computing from Microsoft Corp. called Windows Azure. Overseas plans are still undecided.

According to the U.S. software giant, it is the first time the technology, which also uses Sharepoint software, is being used for a company site.

Gazoo.com users tripled over the last five years to 1.65 million. Toyota Motor Corp. said Friday it wants to raise that to 2 million over the next year.

All the world's major automakers are working on similar technology to bring autos up-to-date with the Internet age, from finding restaurants to helping ensure safe driving.

But a major motive for Toyota is appealing to younger Japanese, who are rapidly losing interest in buying cars and are spending their money on smartphones and video games. The trend is so widespread there is a coined phrase, "kuruma banare," or "departure from cars."

Among the Net content in the works are video games, shopping-site links, virtual events and a special social network to chat about cars, according to Toyota. A smartphone application will guide drivers with an electronic voice to 30,000 destinations from 250 routes.

The site will also offer information on more than 3,000 new and used models, including interviews with engineers.

Switching to Microsoft's cloud computing will cut costs for operating the services, although Toyota plans to invest more money in new content for Gazoo.com.

Toyota reached an agreement with Microsoft in April 2011, to work together on telematics, or network technology for cars.

Toyota looked at other cloud computing services before picking Microsoft for the latest project, said Hiroyuki Yamada, an executive at e-Toyota, which looks over such technology.

It is unclear whether the site will really lead to car sales, but Toyota will be able to tap into data on consumer behavior, as well as try to revive Japanese people's

fading interest in cars, he said.

Gazoo.com is the brainchild of Akio Toyoda, the president and grandson of Toyota's founder. Well versed in Internet technology, Toyoda was ahead of his time in foreseeing the importance of social networks and stressing how Toyota needs a presence in the blogosphere.

Toyota has a partnership with another U.S. cloud computing company, Salesforce.com, which runs a social network for Toyota plug-in hybrid owners so they can see how efficiently they have been driving and be alerted when their vehicle has recharged. Toyoda also pioneered that partnership.

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