

Six Leaps of Innovation

Lots of change out there. New Web widgets, new biotech, new eco-friendly dirt bikes that can jump over your head. Here's a rundown of what and whom to keep an eye on in 2008.

By Michael V. Copeland



Photograph by Michael Lewis for Fortune.

1. Electric dirt bike

Neal Saiki, Zero Motorcycles

Scotts Valley, Calif.

The man behind one of the zippiest electric vehicles on the market honed his engineering skills designing spacecraft for NASA and bike frames for Trek and Santa Cruz Bicycles. But the key to his latest creation - the Zero X electric motorcycle - is the proprietary heat-dissipating material that allows 168 high-power lithium-ion battery cells to be yoked together in a confined space without bursting into flames. The result is 130 pounds of ultrathin precision-welded aluminum that can generate 17,000 watts of instant torque-producing power, hit 60 mph in about four seconds, and do 25-foot jumps off a dirt ramp. (Whether you should do them, however, is between you and your health insurer.)

If EVs are ever going to move from the ecologically correct fringe to Main Street America, it's probably going to happen first with motorcycles like Saiki's: lightweight, easy to maneuver, and perfect for short commutes of 40 miles or less. At \$7,500 the Zero X - it's for trails only; a street-legal version is due early this year - isn't cheap, but that hasn't stopped the first production run from selling out. If you want to know how they ride, ask Google founder Larry Page. He just bought three.