

Asian Autos Top Reliability, Ford Close Behind

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Asian automakers are still building the most reliable cars and trucks, with eight of the top 10 brands from Japanese and Korean companies, according to an annual survey by Consumer Reports.

But several models from Ford Motor Co. are now consistently scoring above Honda and Toyota, the perennial leaders.

While Toyota's youth-oriented Scion brand finished first for the second year in a row, several Ford models, including the midsize Ford Fusion and its cousin, the Mercury Milan, consistently have been at or near the top of their classes, a trend that led Consumer Reports editors to declare that Ford is now making some vehicles with world-class reliability.

After Scion, Honda, Toyota, Infiniti and Acura rounded out the top five brands in reliability based on surveys taken in March of subscribers who own or lease 1.4 million vehicles.

Honda's Insight hybrid was the most reliable vehicle in the survey, while the luxury SUV Volkswagen Touareg was the least reliable. The survey gauges how dependable 2010 model cars and trucks will be based on reliability in the past.

Asian automakers have scored well over the years because they traditionally paid more attention to quality and have tried to perfect manufacturing procedures. The U.S. automakers, however, claim that they have caught up.

"Ford is definitely doing something right," said Rik Paul, the magazine's automotive editor.

Ford's Detroit-area competitors, General Motors Co. and Chrysler Group LLC, didn't fare as well, however.

Chrysler had only one model that Consumer Reports recommended based on reliability and its staff test, and the Chrysler brand finished last out of 33 brands sold in the U.S. One third of Chrysler's models were much worse than average in reliability.

Six models from GM were recommended by the magazine, but it's still inconsistent. Only 21 of 48 models the magazine studied scored average or better in reliability.

The relatively poor performance by GM and Chrysler could hurt efforts to fight back from financial problems that led to stays in bankruptcy court earlier this year. Auto industry officials say the nonprofit Consumer Reports is among the most widely consulted sources when people buy vehicles.

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Officials at GM and Chrysler say they are committed to improving quality.

At Ford, though, four-cylinder versions of the Fusion and Milan finished second in the family car category, beaten only by Toyota's Prius gas-electric hybrid. The Fusion and Milan outscored Toyota Motor Corp.'s Camry and Honda Motor Co.'s Accord, the two top-selling cars in the U.S. "which many people view as the paradigms of reliability," Paul said.

Of the 51 Ford, Lincoln or Mercury models in the survey, 46 were ranked average or better in reliability.

Yet while Mercury was the only Detroit brand to finish in the top 10 (10th), the Ford brand finished 16th, while Lincoln finished 20th. That's largely due to higher-end models — many with all-wheel-drive — scoring below average in reliability, said Jake Fisher, Consumer Reports' senior automotive engineer.

"Those types of problems are keeping them from being truly world class," Fisher said.

Bennie Fowler, Ford's vice president of global quality, said the company is applying the same methods that worked with the Fusion and other models to the ones that didn't perform as well.

Toyota, despite a recent spate of recalls, and Honda consistently build cars that cause few problems for Consumer Reports readers, Paul said. Ford, he said, is approaching that consistency. While GM has some bright spots, it has a ways to go to match the Japanese.

The Dodge Ram pickup, the only Chrysler model recommended by the magazine, did well in road tests and was average in reliability. The recommendation is important, though, because the Ram is Chrysler's top-selling model.

Paul said automakers often can only make quality improvements when new models come out, and those have been few for Chrysler in the last two years.

"Hopefully for them, when they do release new models, they will still have the same level of quality that we saw in the Ram," he said.

The Consumer Reports survey also found that higher-priced cars aren't necessarily more reliable than less-expensive ones. Inexpensive small cars and midsize family sedans were the most reliable in the survey, which questions subscribers about 17 potential problem areas.

Complete results will be in Consumer Reports' December issue, which is due out Nov. 2, or Tuesday for subscribers to the Consumer Reports Web site at <http://www.consumerreports.org>.

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