

Hyundai, VW Lead Pack For Safest Vehicles

Ken Thomas, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — South Korean automakers Hyundai and Kia and German car maker Volkswagen lead the insurance industry's annual list of the safest new vehicles, used by safety-minded consumers looking to buy a new car.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety recognized 66 vehicles on Wednesday with its "top safety pick award" for the 2011 model year, the most-ever awarded by the Virginia-based group. The number was more than double the 27 vehicles selected last year.

Hyundai Motor Corp. and its affiliate Kia Motors Corp., and Volkswagen AG and its Audi brand received the most awards with nine, followed by eight awards apiece by General Motors Co., Ford Motor Co. and Toyota Motor Corp. The awards, used in advertising to attract car buyers, bolster Hyundai and Volkswagen as they attempt to build a larger foothold in the United States.

Hyundai's Genesis sedan, Sonata midsize and Santa Fe and Tucson sport utility vehicles picked up awards, while Kia was recognized for the Optima midsize car, the Forte and Soul small cars, and the Sorento and Sportage SUVs. Volkswagen won plaudits for the Jetta and Jetta SportWagen, the Golf and GTI small cars and the Touareg and Tiguan SUVs. Audi's A3 and A4 sedans and Q5 SUV also made the list.

Subaru and Chrysler received five awards apiece while Volvo and Mercedes had four. Subaru was the only automaker to win awards in every vehicle category in which it competes. Nissan and Honda had two awards each and Mitsubishi and BMW had one.

Hyundai said the award was particularly sweet for the Sonata, which also received the top score of five stars in the government's crash test program. The combination put Sonata "in a safety position unsurpassed in the industry," said John Krafcik, president and CEO of Hyundai Motor America.

Mark Barnes, Volkswagen of America's chief operating officer, said the recognition for VW was a "testament to our commitment to engineering safe vehicles."

GM's winners include the Chevrolet Malibu, Cruze and Equinox; Cadillac CTS and SRX; Buick LaCrosse and Regal and GMC Terrain. Chris Perry, vice president of Chevrolet marketing, said the award would build on "the already strong global safety reputation of the Cruze."

Ford's picks include the Ford Taurus, Fusion, Fiesta, Explorer and Flex; and the Lincoln MKS, MKZ and MKT. Ford vice president Sue Cischke said the Explorer, which arrived at dealer showrooms earlier this month, offered a good example of the company's safety improvements, including inflatable seat belts and technology

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that helps a driver maintain control of the vehicle along tough curves.

Toyota, which has grappled with several high-profile recalls during the past year, scored with the Toyota Avalon, Corolla, Sienna, Highlander and Venza; the Lexus RX; and the Scion tC and xB. Toyota said its eight safety picks were "reflective of our ongoing commitment to developing safe and reliable vehicles for our customers."

The vehicles were chosen for protection in front, side and rear crash tests. To qualify for the award, the insurance industry group also requires the vehicles to have anti-rollover electronic stability control, or ESC, and receive top scores in roof strength tests.

Institute president Adrian Lund credited automakers for "quickly rising to meet the more-challenging criteria for 'Top Safety Pick.'" He said several automakers have requested tests for new models coming out early next year and Lund predicted more winners would be added.

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