

Report: Ford's Quality Is Slipping

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DETROIT (AP) — Quality should be Job 1 at Ford again.

The brand's ranking fell 10 spots in Consumer Reports' annual auto reliability survey, hurt by glitchy touch screens and transmissions. It now ranks 20th out of 28 major brands, based on a survey of the magazine's subscribers.

The Dearborn, Michigan, automaker had been closing the quality gap with Japanese brands in recent years, but it may need to take its own advice from a 1980s ad campaign, which told viewers that "Quality is Job 1," at the company.

Japanese automakers continued to dominate the survey's top rankings. Brands from Toyota, Honda and Mazda held the top nine spots in the 2011 study, while Chrysler's Jeep was the top brand from a U.S. automaker. The Chrysler brand showed the most improvement over last year.

The findings are based on surveys taken this spring of magazine subscribers who own or lease 1.3 million vehicles from the 2002 to 2011 model years. The magazine uses the findings to predict reliability of 2012 models.

Consumer Reports ranks No. 3 on the list of information sources used by Americans to pick vehicles, topped only by brand loyalty and recommendations from friends and family. The magazine released its annual survey results Tuesday in Detroit.

At Ford, magazine subscribers found problems with the MyFordTouch and MyLincolnTouch dashboard control screens, saying they froze or were difficult to use, said David Champion, senior director of auto testing for Consumer Reports. The screens control cabin temperature, the radio and other functions. Also, the company's new small cars, the Focus compact and Fiesta subcompact, have new automatic transmissions that shift often and awkwardly, Champion said.

Although most of the transmission problems were rated as minor, many subscribers said the cars seemed to shift at will, especially at low speeds, Champion said.

"It's as if it's got a brain of its own," he said. "I think a lot of people think there's something wrong with it."

Bennie Fowler, Ford's group vice president for quality, said the company is taking the customer feedback seriously, and is working to continuously improve vehicles.

"Our internal surveys now show that we are largely back on track after addressing these near-term quality issues," he said in a statement.

Ford's Lincoln luxury brand moved up one spot to 14th.

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For the fourth year in a row, Toyota's Scion, a brand geared toward young people, had the fewest problems, followed by Toyota's Lexus brand, Honda's Acura, Mazda, and the Honda brand. Lexus, a perennial top finisher, recovered from a fall last year, rising seven spots on the list.

Scion was tops because the two models covered in the survey, the xB and xD, have been built for several years and the bugs have been worked out, Champion said. Champion also said Mazda improved because its models have been out for several years.

For the most part, older models have better reliability than new or revamped models, said Champion.

At Chrysler, however, new or significantly revamped models led its resurgence. Champion said the Chrysler 200 midsize sedan, and the new Jeep Grand Cherokee and Dodge Durango SUVs helped the company improve its ranking.

"They seem to be totally transfixed on getting it right," Champion said of Chrysler. "It was in many ways 'Do or Die' for Chrysler."

Chrysler has been plagued by reliability problems for years, but has been improving since the U.S. government put Italy's Fiat in charge after Chrysler's 2009 bankruptcy filing. The Chrysler brand, for instance, moved up from 27th last year to 15th this year. Jeep rose 7 spots to finish 13th.

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