Toyota Tops Latest Consumer Reports Survey

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DETROIT (AP) — And the winner is ... Japan.

Japanese brands took seven of the top 10 spots in Consumer Reports' annual reliability rankings, pushing aside their U.S. and European rivals. Toyota Motor Co.'s Scion, Lexus and Toyota brands took the top three spots and the Toyota Prius C, a subcompact hybrid, got the best overall score. Mazda, Subaru and Honda were close behind.

The rankings, released Monday, predict the reliability of 2013 model-year vehicles based on surveys of Consumer Reports' readers. This year, 800,000 people submitted information on 1.2 million vehicles from the 2010 to 2012 model years. The rankings are critical for auto companies, since Americans frequently cite Consumer Reports as a main source of car-buying advice.

Ford and Lincoln, once top performers, plummeted to the bottom of this year's rankings because of persistent problems with glitchy touch screens and bumpy transmissions. Ford was also hurt because three normally reliable models — the Ford Escape, Ford Fusion and Lincoln MKZ — are all new for 2013, so Consumer Reports couldn't predict their reliability.

Also near the bottom were Chrysler Group's Chrysler, Dodge and Ram brands, which have been getting a fast makeover since partnering with Italy's Fiat three years ago. Consumer Reports says models with more features and more powerful engines, like the V-8 versions of the Chrysler 300 and Jeep Grand Cherokee — had the most issues.

The best-performing U.S. brand was Cadillac, from General Motors Co.

Volkswagen AG's luxury Audi brand made the biggest strides in this year's survey, climbing 18 spots to No. 8. It was the best-performing European brand. Glitch-free new models like the A7 sedan got high marks from Jake Fisher, Consumer Reports' director of automotive testing.

"They're out-BMWing BMW, easily, in terms of the driving dynamics," he said.

Electric cars also got impressive results. The all-electric Nissan Leaf was Nissan's best performer, partly because its electric motor has fewer parts than a gasoline engine, Fisher said. But the Chevrolet Volt — an extended-range electric car that has both an electric system and a conventional engine and transmission — also got the highest score of any GM vehicle.

"GM took a lot of painstaking time to develop that car," Fisher said.

The Volt was recalled earlier this year because vehicles crash-tested by the government showed a risk of fire when coolant leaked from the battery. But Consumer Reports' rankings don't reflect that, since the magazine only asks respondents to note issues that have happened on their own vehicles. Only vehicles with 100 or more responses are included. Among 2012 models, the magazine got the most responses for the Honda CR-V, with nearly 3,000.

Fisher said the magazine is getting about the same number of complaints as it did five years ago. But issues with electronics, audio and touch-screen systems have increased while complaints about mechanical problems are down.

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