

Toyota: Top Selling Automaker Despite China Fall

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TOKYO (AP) — Toyota held onto its status as the [world's top-selling automaker](#) [1] in the first quarter of this year, although the three-way race with General Motors and Volkswagen is proving tight, as its sales fall in China and Japan.

Toyota Motor Corp. reported Wednesday it sold 2.43 million vehicles during the January-March period, outpacing U.S. automaker General Motors Co. at 2.36 million vehicles and Volkswagen AG of Germany at 2.27 million vehicles.

Toyota's first quarter sales declined 2.2 percent from a year earlier, while those for GM were up 3.6 percent and Volkswagen's jumped 5.1 percent.

GM's quarterly results were within about 69,000 vehicles of Toyota's.

The Japanese maker of the Prius hybrid and Camry sedan reclaimed its crown as world's top automaker last year, after losing it to GM a year earlier, when it was battered by the tsunami and quake disasters in northeastern Japan.

GM had been No. 1 for seven decades before losing that title to Toyota in 2008.

Toyota has been hit by a resurgence of anti-Japanese sentiment in China because of a territorial dispute over tiny islands, and some Chinese are worried about being seen driving a Japanese car. The company says the situation is slowly improving but getting back to solid growth again is likely to take some time.

The end of subsidies for green vehicles in Japan hurt Toyota sales in its home market. Such incentives had previously helped boost sales of its popular hybrid models.

Toyota's quarterly vehicle sales were down 13 percent in China and down 15 percent in Japan, compared to the same period last year.

Toyota is roaring back in North America, where sales rose 7 percent, as well as in many Asian nations, where it is relatively dominant.

Its stumble in China is a sore point as both GM and Volkswagen are gaining ground in that market, the world's largest, where potential for growth remains vast. The Chinese market is also crucial amid languishing sales in Europe, a far less important market for Toyota.

Last year, Toyota sold 9.7 million cars and trucks worldwide to beat GM's 9.29 million and Volkswagen at 9.1 million.

Toyota shrugged off the latest results, echoing its typical past response.

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"Rather than pursuing numbers, we try to sell one car at a time, producing good cars. We aren't focused on being No. 1," said company spokeswoman Shino Yamada.

GM said it is aggressively trying to take customers from other automakers by rolling out new vehicles and entering new market segments. "Toyota, Ford, Volkswagen. It doesn't matter whose customers we win. A day doesn't go by that we don't try to increase our sales all over the world," spokesman Jim Cain said.

Michael Dunne, an expert on the auto industry in China and president of Dunne & Co., said that Chinese are still buying quite a number of Japanese cars, but he also warned the competition remained intense.

"They must contend with powerful American, German and Korean competitors. In addition, they must find ways to cooperate with their Chinese joint venture partners, which can be difficult duty when the two countries are at odds over territory," he said.

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