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DEE-ANN DURBIN - AP Auto Writer - Associated Press

Ford Motor Co., stung by falling quality ratings because of its glitch-prone MyFord Touch system, is planning a major upgrade that it hopes will fix the problems — and repair its own reputation.

Early next year, Ford is sending flash drives with a software upgrade to approximately 250,000 U.S. customers with MyFord Touch and MyLincoln Touch, the equivalent system in Ford's luxury Lincoln brand. Owners can do the upgrade themselves in about 45 minutes, or dealers will do it for free. Ford is still deciding how it will offer the upgrade to 200,000 buyers outside of the U.S.

Ford knows of no other car company that has given owners the option of upgrading their own software on this scale. The unprecedented step underscores the urgency of the problem for Ford, which last month fell from 10th place to 20th place in Consumer Reports' annual reliability rankings largely because of MyFord Touch. Ford also plummeted in a J.D. Power quality survey earlier this year.

MyFord Touch, which debuted last year on the Ford Edge, replaces traditional dashboard knobs and buttons with a touch screen. Drivers control climate, navigation, entertainment, phone calls and other functions using touch or voice commands. It's a $750 option on lower trim levels, but comes standard on higher-end ones. Ford quickly rolled out the system on the Ford Explorer, Ford Focus and other models.

Dealer phone lines and Internet chat rooms were soon buzzing with complaints. The system shut down without warning and took too long to reboot. It didn't understand voice commands and didn't always respond to owners' touch. Some owners found the information-packed screens overwhelming.

Ford had dealers perform four software updates and paid dealers to hold owner clinics. But it soon realized it had to do more. The latest upgrade makes significant changes. Screens are now simpler and cleaner, with larger text and shading to outline buttons. Voice recognition is improved. Ford says the new system responds to touch commands more quickly and is less likely to shut down.

New models due out next year, including the redesigned Ford Escape and Ford Taurus, will automatically get the upgraded system.

Ford won't say how much it's spending on the upgrade.

Ford is unapologetic about the system, saying MyFord Touch is an advanced technology that's drawing new customers to the brand. Sales of the new Ford Explorer have more than doubled so far this year, for example. But the company also learned quickly that buyers aren't as forgiving with glitches in their cars as they are with their phones or computers.

"People's expectation of what's in the car is totally different than what they brought home from Best Buy," Gary Jablonski, Ford's manager of Sync platform development, told The Associated Press in a recent interview. Sync, a four-year-old voice command system that Ford designed with Microsoft Corp., serves as the platform for the more advanced MyFord Touch.

Forrest Brown, a Ford dealer in Dyersville, Iowa, got a barrage of complaints last winter when customers were unable to defrost their windshields or turn up the heat because their screens were going blank. But the problems have become less frequent as Ford updates the software. Brown has also started inviting customers back to the dealership so he can answer questions about the system.

"We've come to the realization that this type of technology is going to be in almost all vehicles in the future, so you might as well get used to it and understand it and make your customers aware of it," Brown said.

Jablonski insists MyFord Touch was thoroughly tested and not brought to the market too soon, as some critics contend. The problem, he said, is that not everything is testable. The system syncs up to more than 70 different kinds of mobile phones, for example, which are constantly getting updates of their own. Customers may blame the car for something that is really the fault of the phone.

But Ford realizes it may have gone further than its customers wanted to go. The company is planning to bring back volume and tuning knobs, for example, because it found people didn't like using a touch screen for those functions.

Jeremy Anwyl, the chief executive of auto information site Edmunds.com, once watched a MyFord Touch screen freeze up during a Ford demonstration. Still, he gives Ford credit for taking a chance on new technology, even at the expense of its quality scores. Vehicle quality is getting so good that customers are increasingly basing their buying decisions on high-tech options, he said.

"I'd rather have MyFord Touch and Sync and take the heat from than not have it at all," he said.

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