

Car quality dinged by tech glitches, survey finds

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Car buyers increasingly want high-tech features like voice recognition and navigation. But they're not very forgiving of the car company when those systems fail.

The top complaints in J.D. Power's closely-watched survey of new vehicle owners, released Wednesday, involved technologies that drivers are clamoring for. Voice recognition systems either didn't recognize commands or didn't work at all. Bluetooth systems had trouble connecting with drivers' phones.

The result: Just when automakers had reached their highest-ever levels of quality — as they did in J.D. Power's 2012 survey — technology glitches are dragging their scores down.

"I've had companies tell me they would rather develop a new car from the ground up than a new entertainment system," said Tom Mutchler, program manager of vehicle interface at Consumer Reports.

This year's survey questioned 83,442 owners and lessees of 2013 model year vehicles in their first 90 days of ownership. They were contacted at random through state registration data.

Porsche, GMC, Lexus, Infiniti and Chevrolet topped the rankings, with owners reporting fewer than 100 problems per 100 vehicles. The worst-performing brands were Scion, Fiat, Mitsubishi, Nissan and Mini. Their owners reported 135 problems or more.

The industry average was 113 problems per vehicle. Quality has gotten so good,

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

industry-wide, that the difference between the highest-ranking and lowest-ranking brands in J.D. Power's survey amounts to just two problems per vehicle.

Brands that bore the brunt of owner dissatisfaction often had the newest gadgetry. Cadillac's new ATS sedan is equipped with the CUE touch screen infotainment system, which has been panned by critics who say it doesn't always respond to the touch. Cadillac fell 10 places in the rankings. Nissan, which dropped 17 spots, was hurt by problems with features in its new Altima. Car owners have complained in online forums that the Altima's voice recognition system doesn't always understand them, and the car's Bluetooth system has trouble connecting to their phones.

J.D. Power, which has been conducting the survey since 1987, said the top complaints used to concern mechanical defects, such as engine noise, that could be readily fixed at a dealership. Now, owners complain about design or technology flaws that aren't easy for a dealer to remedy. For example, wind noise — the third most common complaint this year — is related to the vehicle's design, not its mechanical parts.

"Automakers are investing billions of dollars into designing and building vehicles and adding technologies that consumers desire and demand. But the risk is that the vehicle design, or the technology within the vehicle, in some cases may not meet customer needs," said David Sargent, vice president of J.D. Power's global automotive business.

Sargent said automakers could mitigate the problems by teaching owners more about their high-tech features or by providing more frequent software updates.

Aaron Bragman, the Detroit bureau chief for the car-buying site Cars.com, said automakers are held to a different standard than smartphone makers.

"With your phone, that's a \$200 piece of electronics, so you don't expect it to have the same kind of reliability. But the car is the second most expensive piece of equipment that most people ever purchase, after their house," he said.

Car companies have little choice but to keep giving consumers the high-tech features they expect, said Consumer Reports Mutchler. He thinks the issues will get sorted out in the end, possibly with the intervention of tech companies like Apple Inc.

"It's not that the touch screen is bad or the technology is bad. Some have just had really crummy implementation" he said.

Some manufacturers boosted their scores by simplifying infotainment systems for drivers. Chrysler's UConnect system is quick and intuitive, and its features are duplicated on hard knobs and buttons, so drivers don't rely entirely on a smudgy touch screen, Bragman said. Audi lets drivers control functions using a knob near the cup holders. Audi, Chrysler and Dodge all moved up in this year's survey compared with last year.

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While touch screen systems that control the radio, climate controls and other features are cheaper than those with knobs and buttons, Bragman expects manufacturers to back off them a little and replace the hardware. That way, if the screens go out, drivers can still have access to their controls.

Ford has said it plans to reintroduce dials and knobs after getting dinged for the quality of its MyFordTouch dashboard touchscreen. Its Sync voice recognition system has also drawn complaints. Ford had more top-performing models than any other company in J.D. Power's 2010 survey, but dropped to 27th in the rankings in 2012 and 2013.

Ford points out that nearly 80 percent of its cars and trucks have MyTouch and Sync, double the mix of cars with infotainment systems at Toyota and Honda.

The Honda Civic was the top-performing small car in this year's survey, while Honda's CR-V was the top small SUV. The Toyota Camry led the midsize car category, and Chevrolet Impala ranked best among large cars. Chevrolet also had the best large SUV — the Tahoe — and the best pickups — the Avalanche and Silverado.

Smart rose 19 places in the survey, the highest of any brand. Smart doesn't have a dashboard infotainment system, but allows drivers to download an app to their smartphone that gives them navigation and access to music.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/28/2014 - 1:52pm):

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