

Domestic Vehicles Became More Reliable

A Consumer Reports survey shows U.S. automakers overtook Europeans, but still were second to Asians.

By John Porretto, *Associated Press*

DETROIT - For the first time in a quarter-century, new vehicles from Detroit automakers on average have surpassed those from European competitors in reliability, although the most reliable cars and trucks continue to be built by Asian companies, according to a new survey from Consumer Reports.

The magazine's 2004 auto issue, which hits newsstands today, also reports that imports continue to outscore domestically built vehicles in owner satisfaction and that finding a car or truck with a high safety rating is much easier than it was a few years ago. Consumer Reports, known for its scrutiny of products, sent questionnaires to 4.1 million subscribers of its magazine and Web site, seeking insight into vehicles they own. Reliability trends are based on 675,000 responses.

This year's survey marked the first time in 25 years that cars and trucks from General Motors Corp., Ford Motor Co., and DaimlerChrysler AG's Chrysler Group scored better in reliability than European rivals, the publication said. "To our subscribers and to many people, reliability is what they're looking for," David Champion, senior director of Consumer Reports' auto test staff, said yesterday in a conference call. "The domestics are making tremendous progress in putting to bed a lot of the problems they were stuck with."

To establish reliability, Consumer Reports asked subscribers to report problems in any of 14 areas, such as engine or electrical trouble, for vehicles up to eight years old. For the 2003 model year, the industry average was 17 problems per 100 vehicles, down from 18 in the 2002 survey. The survey revealed that, among cars and trucks less than a year old, the average problem rate for European brands was 20 per 100 vehicles - two more than domestic brands. Last year, U.S. and European automakers were tied at 21 problems per 100 vehicles less than a year old.

The problem rate for the newest models from Japanese and Korean automakers held steady year-over-year at 12 per 100 vehicles. The magazine said vehicles from Acura, Honda, Infiniti, Lexus, Mazda and Toyota had been the most reliable over the last five years. Among European brands, all models from Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Jaguar and Land Rover were rated below average in the survey. In owner satisfaction, Asian and European brands filled all but three of 33 slots in Consumer Reports' list of "most satisfying" vehicles. The list was based on responses from 226,000 subscribers.

Consumer Reports said it also gave an “excellent” overall safety rating in the new issue to 21 sedans, up from nine three years ago. The number of SUVs with an excellent rating rose to 11 from only two during the same period. The magazine said the higher ratings were the result of general improvements in both crash-protection and accident-avoidance scores. Consumer Reports combines crash-test results produced by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety with its own performance ratings to form its assessment.

Consumers Reports is published by [Consumers Union](#), which is based in Yonkers, N.Y. The magazine buys all vehicles it tests, and accepts no advertising.

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