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AUTOMOTIVE

Driver assistance propel Porsche, BMW to top of rankings: report

July 29, 2016

Porsche 2017 Panamera

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Luxury automakers vastly outperform mass-market competitors in measurements of owner attachment and excitement, according to a new study by J.D. Power.

For the 12th consecutive year, Porsche's score of 877 out of 1,000 led all brands in the United States Automotive Performance, Execution and Layout (APEAL) Study, with BMW, Jaguar, Mercedes-Benz, Land Rover, Lexus, Lincoln and Audi following. These companies' driver-assist technologies accounted for a large portion of the gap and help instigate recommendations to friends and family.

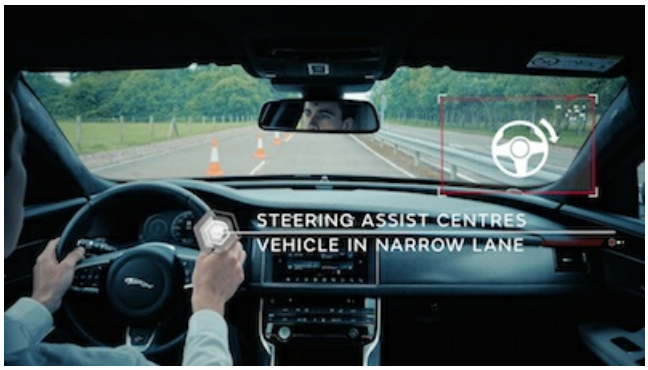
"Consumer's experience with today's features like lane departure warning, low speed collision avoidance, automatic braking and other assist technologies are helping to pave the way to more fully autonomous driving," said Renee Stephens, vice president of U.S. auto quality at J.D. Power. "Over 80 percent of consumers want technologies that assist their driving, but still only 14 percent express interest in having their next vehicle be fully autonomous (at a market price of $3000).

"As consumers utilize and begin to trust the semi-autonomous features, that will build more trust and confidence in giving up control to fully autonomous driving," she said. "We're not there yet, but on the right road."

The APEAL Study asks consumers to rate vehicles in 90 attributes across 10 categories after 90 days of ownership. Those categories are exterior, seats, interior, driving dynamics, storage and space, engine/transmission, fuel economy, visibility and safety, heating/ventilation/air-conditioning and audio/communication/entertainment/navigation.

Driver assistance

In otherwise similar vehicles, those that have blind spot monitoring, low speed collision avoidance and other similar safety and assist features significantly outscore their counterparts. Overall, scores are 41 percent higher for vehicles with blind spot monitoring and 30 percent higher for collision avoidance.



Jaguar Land Rover Roadwork Assist

"Technology-enabled safety features help drivers feel more comfortable and confident while driving their vehicles," said Renee Stephens, vice president of U.S. automotive quality at J.D. Power, in a statement. "These features are also 'gateway technologies' to autonomous driving capabilities, so the continued level of consumer interest in them will be a critical metric to watch as the industry evolves toward including more automation in new vehicles."

Fuel economy, audio/communication/entertainment/navigation and safety gained 14, 6 and 4 points respectively as the categories with the largest growth.

On the reverse end of the spectrum, usefulness of and ease of use for navigational system were two of the lowest scoring attributes, even as the category grew overall. Engine/transmission lost a point compared to the previous year due to 8- and 9-speed transmissions resulting in a decline in smoothness when shifting.

Overall, automakers continue to show signs of continual improvement. Over the past 10 years, newly launched vehicles have scored 29 points higher than their segment average, with the same remaining true this year.

Porsche 718 Cayman

While Porsche's 877 score is a sizable 18 points ahead of second-place BMW, the latter brand took home the most segment award among premium brands, with three. The BMW 2 Series was the highest scoring small premium car, while the X1 and X6 won for small and midsize premium SUV, respectively.

BMW also had the highest scoring vehicle overall in the 7 Series, but there were not enough large premium cars for J.D. Power to award the segment.

The full results, including segment rankings and scores, are available here.

The APEAL score translates almost directly into recommendations. Those whose vehicles score at least the 801 industry average and also do not have defects or problems within 90 days of ownership "definitely will" recommend the vehicle to others at a 90 percent clip.

BMW 7 Series

For those with scores of 800 or lower, that rate plummets to 64 percent. However, regardless of score, those who experience a problem with the vehicle have advocacy rates of just 49 percent.

"Typically, luxury brands score higher in the APEAL study than non-premium brands," Ms. Stephens said. "However, that gap has narrowed over time.

"In the past, luxury models had more upscale features like leather, wood as well as option content," she said. "They still do to an extent, but less of an extent than in years past.

"Now, you can find driver assist features like lane departure warning, blind spot monitoring and low speed collision avoidance on models in non-premium brands and various price points."

More APEALing

The premium brand average of 844 compared to non-premium brands' 794 suggests that advocacy is far more likely for premium brands, and that consumers agree they are getting a better product.

However, while the significantly higher APEAL scores for premium and luxury vehicles will aid with advocacy in theory, non-premium brand automobiles have higher-quality new vehicles than their premium counterparts.

Premium brands averaged 108 problems per 100 vehicles within the first three months of ownership and non-premium brands averaged 104. Initial quality is correlated with repeat business, suggesting that luxury brands should get back to basics and improve quality control before proceeding to make sales (see story).

While Porsche regularly performs well in these studies, Tesla, not included in the APEAL Study, is also finding a place in consumers' hearts.

U.S. electronic automaker Tesla Motors' Model S is the ideal luxury passenger vehicle, according to research and consulting firm AutoPacific, Inc.

Owing to its focus on technology, Tesla also unseated Porsche as the top brand to end its three-year reign. Tesla's popularity points to a shift in concerns for today's drivers and further cements its growing reputation among luxury consumers as they adapt environmental and technologically minded values (see story).

"Launch performance is critical designing and delivering vehicles with high appeal that lasts over time," Ms. Stephens said. "Some manufacturers are launching with high appeal as well as low problems, with improved performance compared to predecessor models.

"Consumers are increasingly describing the quality and the appeal of their vehicle in terms of their technology experience that will only increase over time as increased capability is added to vehicles," she said. "Having intuitive controls that respond in a way that drivers are comfortable with will garner usage and trust over time."