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## America's Strongest Automakers

Hannah Elliott, 03.11.09, 5:30 PM ET

Dieter Zetsche, the mustachioed CEO of Daimler AG, told reporters at the Geneva auto show last week that Mercedes-Benz and BMW may form an alliance. Zetsche's announcement fueled longstanding rumors that the two luxury powerhouses would consolidate in a bid for better efficiency and technological development.

Such an agreement would unite two of the most admired car brands on the planet, combining a total value of more than \$48 billion, according to Interbrand, a global brand management firm.

Until then, [BMW](#) and [Mercedes](#) will have to settle for being two of the top five strongest car brands in the U.S.; the brand most admired of all is Toyota. The German automakers are firmly cemented as the most admired luxury brands.

### In Depth: America's Strongest Automakers

"I think in general, that's where the luxury brands have performed better than others--in distinguishing themselves," says Wes Brown, a partner at Iceology, a Los Angeles-based consumer-research firm. "If you want a vehicle that's the most fun to drive, you go to BMW; if you want something that is the epitome of luxury, it's the Mercedes. And then everyone else has tried to find their own little spot."

### Behind the Numbers

To compile our list of America's strongest automakers, we used brand-value data from Interbrand, a marketing firm with offices worldwide. We added scores from the 2009 Car Brands Perception Survey from *Consumer Reports*, green-efficiency and design ratings from J.D. Power and Associates, and domestic retail sales figures from January and February of 2009 (sales were weighted down so as not to override brand-value and consumer perception).

Each of those components hints at brand strength as a function of consumer loyalty, product quality, safety records and eco-friendliness. But the main factor that goes into building an auto brand admired by consumers is an intangible combination of them all: emotion.

"The decision process in virtually every category is 70-30 weighting for emotional versus rational decision making," says Robert Passikoff, president of Brand Keys, a New York-based marketing firm. "Ultimately, if you don't like the color, you're not buying the car."

Emotion is about more than desire. Many people admire Rolls-Royce, but most will never afford a Phantom coupe. That doesn't mean, however, that they won't buy a more affordable car based off any less a romanticized notion.

Consumers rarely admit to buying something simply because it makes them feel good, Brown says, but it happens more often than not: "The reality is if [practicality] was really all that people cared about, then luxury sales wouldn't be strong at all, and everyone would ultimately be driving a minivan."

### Leader of the Pack

[Toyota](#) earned the No. 1 slot on our list, due in large part to its Prius hybrid, which capitalized on Toyota's well-established reputation for reliability and then redefined the brand as earth-friendly. Four products from Toyota--the Highlander, Prius, RAV4 and Sienna--all earned "top-pick" status from *Consumer Reports* this year, the most of any one brand.

"Top picks" are considered the best all-around models in their category. To earn the distinction, they must score at or near the top of their segment in more than 300 road-tests and reliability and safety requirements set out by *Consumer*

*Reports*. Each model must also sufficiently pass government safety tests and offer electronic stability control as standard or optional equipment.

Ninth ranked [Hyundai](#) is one brand on the rise. The Genesis sedan won Car of the Year at the 2009 Detroit Auto Show, and the company's Elantra SE was the top-rated small sedan by *Consumer Reports*.

"The consumer perception for Hyundai is moving very quickly right now," says Jake Fisher, a senior automotive engineer for *Consumer Reports*. "I think consumers deserve more credit. I think they're going to take a look, and they will give them a chance, and perception will change to the reality that Hyundai makes reliable cars and quite well-built cars."

### **For a Brand, Image is Everything**

The rough economy doesn't necessarily hurt brands, as Hyundai can attest. In fact, a strong brand actually reduce financial risk.

"In down times, you get what you call 'flight to quality' or 'flight to safety,' and people tend to buy things that they trust," says Jez Frampton, CEO of Interbrand.

What all the automakers on our list have in common is that they differentiate their brand and remain consistent with an identity. Consumers therefore remain familiar enough with the brand to be aware of its latest offerings.

Others have not fared as well. **General Motors'** Saturn and Pontiac brands have suffered in the past few years--they are slated to be discontinued and reduced, respectively--because they haven't clearly defined what they stand for, Passikoff says.

"I say 'Toyota,' and you say 'reliability'. I say 'BMW,' and you say 'engineering'. I say 'General Motors,' and people go 'uh?' And that 'uh?' That's the sound of a brand dying."

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