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## The Most Dependable Cars On The Road

Hannah Elliott, 03.19.09, 7:00 AM ET

Cars have got to last for the long haul these days. With Americans hit by the highest unemployment rate since 1983 and more layoffs looming, it doesn't pay to take a chance on a vehicle that could be less than reliable.

Consumers are acting accordingly. The median age for cars on U.S. roadways is at record-high levels, according to a report released this month from R.L. Polk: 9.4 years for cars and 7.6 years for trucks. Polk analysts estimate 46.4 million new cars will be sold in 2009, an 18% drop globally from 2008.

J.D. Power and Associates' latest dependability study, released today, shows just how important reliability is these days. For automakers, durability and brand loyalty now go hand-in-hand.

### In Pictures: The Most Dependable Cars On The Road

Buick and Jaguar topped this year's list of brands sold in the U.S. that demonstrate the greatest general dependability, with Lexus, Toyota and Mercury rounding out the top five. Suzuki, Volkswagen and Land Rover were the bottom three brands on the list.

#### Behind the Numbers

To determine the most dependable vehicles on the road today, J.D. Power asked 46,000 initial owners of three-year-old cars to report, in eight categories, the type of problems the vehicles developed over the last year. Categories included driving experience, engine, exterior, features/controls, heating/ventilating/cooling, interior, seats and audio/entertainment/navigation. All told, the survey covered 202 sub-categories across all areas of the vehicle.

Final rankings derive from a "problems per 100 vehicles" (PP100) score, with lower scores reflecting higher quality.

Automakers from Asia topped the individual categories this year, with Acura, Honda, Lexus, Mazda, Nissan, Scion and Toyota all placing as segment winners. The Toyota marque stood out with five wins, including the Toyota Prius in the compact car segment, Toyota Highlander in the midsized SUV segment and Toyota Tundra in the large pickup segment. The Solara topped the midsize sporty car size category and Sequoia the large SUV bracket.

Robert Passikoff, the president of New York-based Brand Keys, a market research company, says Toyota's reputation for both reliability and eco-mindedness makes it highly valued by consumers in a down market.

#### Asian and Domestic Standouts

Several models from Lexus, Toyota's luxury brand, ranked remarkably well. The LS 430 sedan, the winner of the large premium car segment, returned especially positive results. Its overall score was 61 PP100, the lowest of any model in the study.

The Lexus SC 430, a \$66,805 coupe, scored below 100 as well, and beat the Porsche 911 and Chevrolet Corvette in the premium sporty car category. Lexus has done well in other rankings this year. *Consumer Reports* ranked the LS 460 sedan the best overall vehicle of 2009.

"Lexus tends to be very luxurious, very comfortable, have the latest technology and be reliable," notes Jake Fisher, senior automotive engineer for *Consumer Reports*.

Another high note, in light of the possible bankruptcy brewing at General Motors: list-topper Buick.

Its success didn't surprise some industry insiders, however. Festekjian says Buick is a routine leader in dependability studies. It has ranked among the top 10 nameplates each year since the J.D. Power study was redesigned in 2003.

Still, sales at Buick were down 51.5% last month from February 2008, more than Lincoln (down 41.2%), Mercury (down 44.6%) and Cadillac (down 51.2%). Toyota sales were down 40% year-over-year and Lexus dropped 38.4%. Jaguar, Buick's co-winner of the dependability survey, dropped a relatively small 25.3% in sales.

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