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America's Best Car Brands

provided by Forbes

Toyota, Ford and Honda top the list of best-loved car companies.

By Hannah Elliott

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2011 Toyota Avalon

[Toyota](#) has recalled more than 5.3 million vehicles in the past year and been forced to institute the most far-reaching sales program in its history in order to attract buyers. But according to several reports, the Japanese brand has maintained high levels of customer loyalty and positive perception.

In fact, while recalls effectively lowered consumer loyalty 11% from November 2009 to February 2010, according to automotive research firm R.L. Polk, the downward trend was short-lived. From February to March of this year, loyalty ratings rose by 10%.

"Customer loyalty among owners of recalled vehicles increased more than the loyalty of other Toyota vehicle owners—strong signs that Toyota's communication strategy and steps taken at the dealership level to maintain customer relationships worked in its favor," Polk reported in its July analysis.

As a result, Toyota is among the best-loved car brands in America, according to our analysis, joining a couple of

domestic brands—[Ford](#) and [Chevrolet](#)—in a race to the top.

It's not a bad showing for Detroit, considering American automakers' financial and organizational woes over the last 18 months. Still, higher-end foreign carmakers like [Mercedes-Benz](#), [BMW](#) and [Lexus](#) still dominate the list of brands Americans love.

Behind the Numbers

To compile our list of America's Best Car Brands, we looked at data from Consumer Reports that rated each brand based on safety, quality, value, performance, design/style, technology/innovation and environmental friendliness. The scores in our slides reflect how well 1,752 adults (all in households with at least one car) perceived each brand in those seven categories, when asked in a telephone survey last December. Their answers were tallied by totaling the number of times a specific brand was mentioned as a good example of each of the seven categories, divided by the number of times the brand was mentioned without being aided (reading from a list vs. naming the brand off-hand).

We also considered scores from the 2010 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index U.S. Auto Industry Study, a national benchmarking study that uses mystery shoppers to measure and compare how consumers are treated at car dealerships. The study was conducted between July 2009 and June 2010 using 3,658 hired anonymous shoppers at dealerships located throughout the U.S. Our list includes only those vehicles among the top 10 in the Consumer Reports study and among the top 20 (because of some tie scores) in the Pied Piper study.

It should be noted that the data from Consumer Reports were compiled six months ago, which means buyers can expect a potentially different outcome in next year's report.

"When we do it again next year I think we will see that Toyota has dropped slightly," says David Champion, the senior director of Consumer Reports' auto test center. "I don't think it's going to be a wholesale drop, I think it's going to be a few percentage points probably. Most Toyotas are still very reliable ... but I do think that the issues around the number of recalls will hurt them."

Building a Brand Perception

The biggest factors in determining brand perception are issues like recalls and negative news coverage. Consumers care most about safety, quality, value, performance and environmental kindness, in that order, according to Consumer Reports. So while brands that are known for stellar service in one area—like [Volvo](#) is known for safety—do well on our list, brands that can excel in several areas—like Toyota—do even better. (Toyota scored the top spots for quality, technology and environmental friendliness.)

Ford does especially well in the quality category: Of 51 Ford, [Lincoln](#) and [Mercury](#) products tested by Consumer Reports, 46 of them earned average or better ratings for predicted reliability.

Luxury brands do well in the performance and design categories. BMW topped the performance segment, while Lexus, [Cadillac](#) and Mercedes-Benz tied for having the perceived best design and style of any cars on the road. Mercedes tops Pied Piper's list of satisfaction at the dealerships.


Mercedes is the poster child for positive experiences at the showroom, says Fran O'Hagan, founder of Pied Piper Consulting. "At Mercedes, the sales person is willing to work hard for your benefit," he says. "They'll give you the walk-around, they encourage you to take a test drive. They try to figure out what brought you in."

The cars with the lowest scores—those that didn't make our list—are predictable. Faltering sales ([Mitsubishi](#)), clichéd status and termination ([Hummer](#)), poor safety ratings ([Jeep](#)) and recent financial problems ([Saab](#)) have done nothing to perk consumer perception.

Can the low-scoring brands stage a comeback? For most, it doesn't look good. "Mitsubishi is hanging on by a thread," says Champion. "There's nothing that we can see on the horizon that will improve their brand perception."

Full List: America's Best Car Brands

America's Best Car Brands

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Full List: America's Best Car Brands



Toyota

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Consumer Reports Ranking: 1
Pied Piper Score: 105 (industry average is 104)




Ford

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Consumer Reports Ranking: 2
Pied Piper Score: 105 (industry average is 104)




Honda

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Consumer Reports Ranking: 3
Pied Piper Score: 105 (industry average is 104)




Chevrolet

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Consumer Reports Ranking: 4
Pied Piper Score: 105 (industry average is 104)



Volvo

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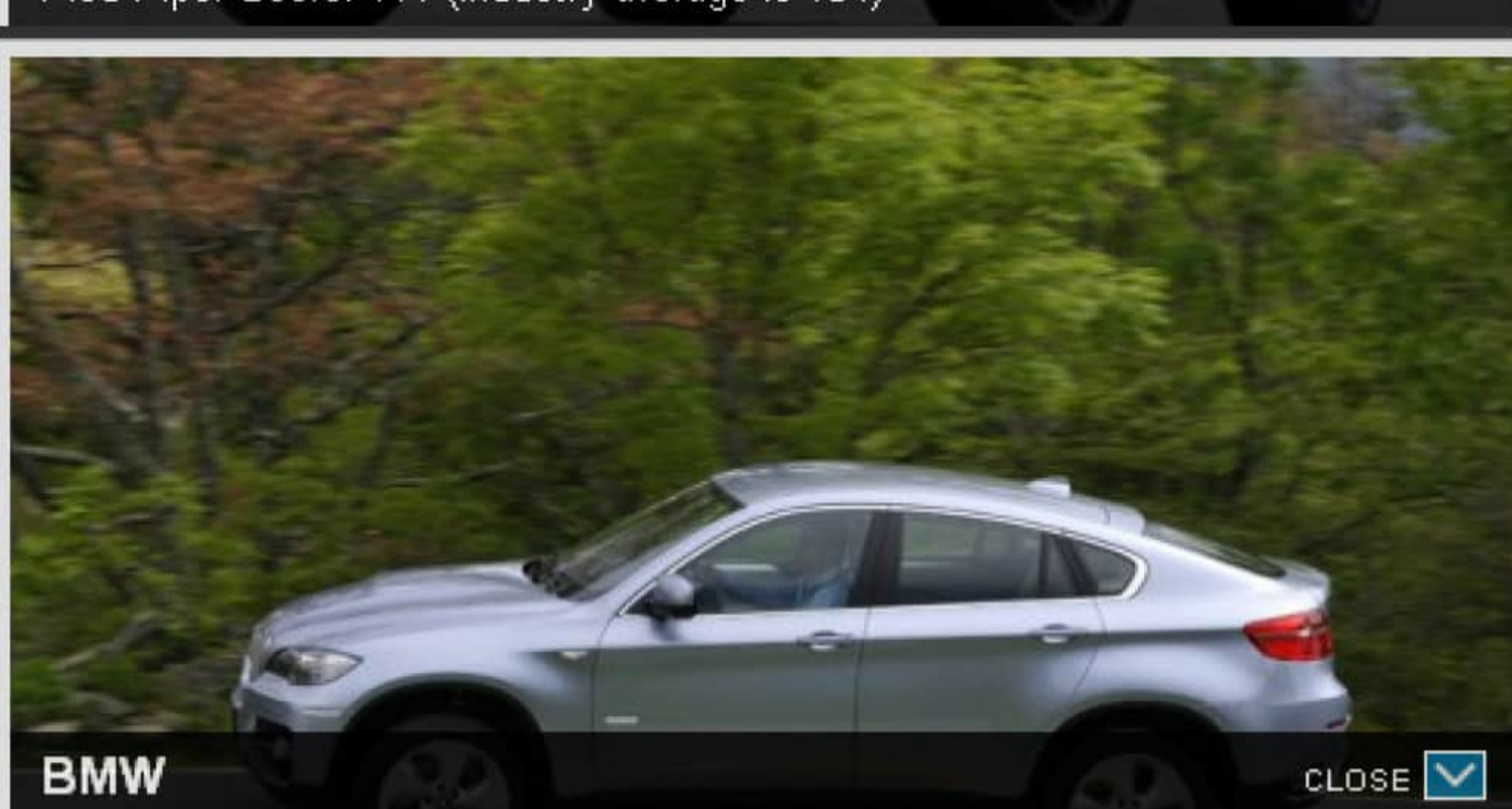
Consumer Reports Ranking: 5
Pied Piper Score: 105 (industry average is 104)




Mercedes-Benz

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Consumer Reports Ranking: 6
Pied Piper Score: 111 (industry average is 104)



BMW

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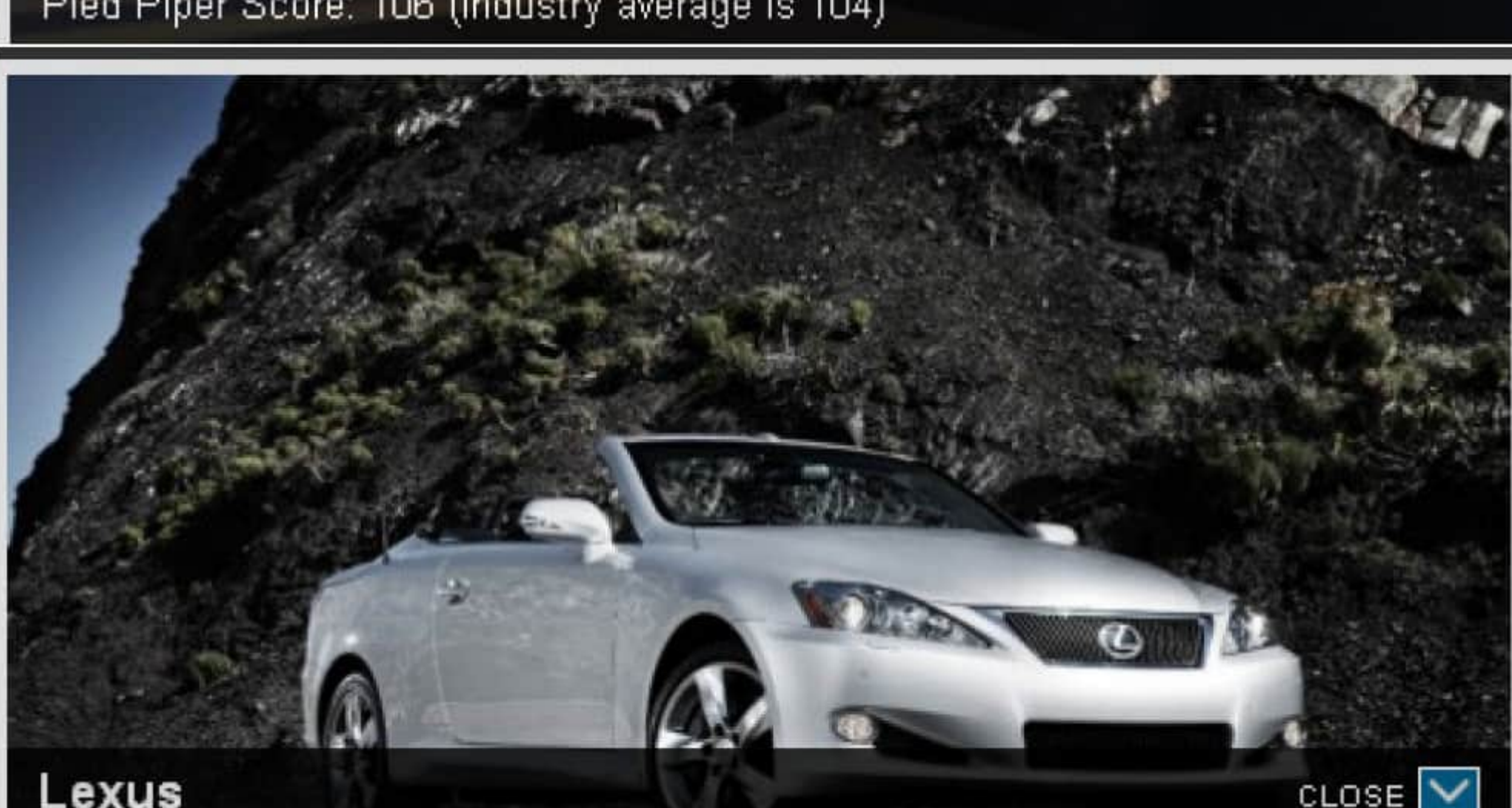
Consumer Reports Ranking: 7
Pied Piper Score: 105 (industry average is 104)



Cadillac

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Consumer Reports Ranking: 8
Pied Piper Score: 106 (industry average is 104)



Lexus

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Consumer Reports Ranking: 10
Pied Piper Score: 110 (industry average is 104)