

The Star-Ledger

Wheel woman: The customer satisfaction guessing game

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For the Star-Ledger

IT'S SURPRISING HOW much money and time is spent in surveys and studies that try to determine how satisfied consumers are with their cars and their car-shopping experiences.

And you know what?

Just like the wide-ranging experiences that you and I come across with our cars and during our car-shopping, the surveys can't seem to agree on which vehicles are most satisfying and which car brands provide the best customer environment.

For example, last week a new survey debuted attempting to gauge how satisfied car-shopping consumers are when they visit various dealerships.

According to the 2007 Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index, Acura dealerships were top for car shoppers and were especially good at giving shoppers compelling reasons to buy from their specific stores.

But just eight months ago, the annual J.D. Power and Associates' annual Sales Satisfaction Index named Jaguar as the best car brand for the car-buying process.

Meantime, another well-known automotive researcher, AutoPacific, released its annual Vehicle Satisfaction Awards last month and said buyers of the 2007 Cadillac DTS large sedan and 2007 Lincoln MKS luxury crossover sport utility vehicle registered the most overall satisfaction with their purchases.

AutoPacific also said Infiniti was the car brand with the highest overall satisfaction rating.

Surveys are not the same

Are you as confused as I am?

It's best to look at the details -- who was surveyed, when and how many. It's also good to remember exactly what is being evaluated.

The report by Pied Piper Management Co. is new and surveyed shoppers, not necessarily buyers, at some 1,600 dealerships.

Keep in mind that there are some 21,000 new-car dealerships in the United States, according to industry journal Automotive News. So, Pied Piper of Pacific Grove, Calif., conducted surveys at 7.3 percent of the total.

Still, Pied Piper dug up some intriguing tidbits.

For example, Acura rose to the top because its shopper experiences were the most consistent among dealerships, Pied Piper said.

The report said salespeople at Land Rover dealerships are more likely than others to give customers a

walk-around of the sophisticated, luxury vehicles to explain various features.

And, despite the popular myth that car shoppers feel that dealership salespeople can be overbearing, Pied Piper's survey found that the opposite is true in many cases -- that shoppers feel that they've been undersold on new models.

Power's wealth of studies

J.D. Power of Westlake Village, Calif., has been studying car buying and satisfaction for more than 25 years and, therefore, has more experience in automotive surveys than any other entity whose studies are publicized.

(Note that car companies conduct studies, too, but they aren't typically shared with the rest of us.)

Power's most recent Sales Satisfaction Index, from last November, developed out of survey responses from more than 42,000 new-car buyers -- not Pied Piper's shopping prospects who may or may not buy.

Further, these buyers were the ones who registered their new vehicles in May 2006 and account for perhaps 3 percent of new models sold that month nationwide.

But consumers still can learn insights into showroom experiences.

For example, focusing on the purchase process, Power found that once it starts, it averages three hours, and a buyer spends the most time -- an average 47 minutes -- selecting the specific vehicle and options.

Also, even though car buyers are spending lots of money for a big-ticket item, they're time-conscious and don't want to sit around, waiting for paperwork to get done.

As you might guess, these kinds of things affect how satisfying the purchase experience is at a dealership.

But car satisfaction doesn't end there.

As Power notes, "perceptions about dependability can have a tremendous impact on an owner's satisfaction" with a vehicle, too.

So the company surveys owners of 3-year-old cars through a separate Vehicle Dependability Study.

Last issued in August 2006, it found that Lexus was the top brand for providing dependability.

In fact, Lexus has held that position for 12 straight years as owners have reported few, if any, problems after they own their cars.

Another cut at the issue

Meantime, AutoPacific of Tustin, Calif., has worked in recent years to objectively rate how satisfied buyers of new cars are and named Cadillac's full-size DTS sedan as the car with the "highest overall satisfaction rating."

AutoPacific surveyed some 24,000 buyers of 2007 vehicles that were bought or leased between Sept. 1 and Dec. 31, 2006, for its survey, which, as you can guess, is a minute percentage of all buyers of 2007 vehicles.

Still, AutoPacific gets comments on a wider range of issues all in one report.

For example, the Vehicle Satisfaction Awards include feedback on how an owner feels a car operates, how comfortable it is, the sense of safety it provides as well as the owner's overall purchase or lease-setup experience.

So, the large DTS sedan rose to the top for its generous interior room, comfortable ride as well as technology features, among other things.

And the 2007 Ford Edge tied for high overall satisfaction with the 2007 Hyundai Santa Fe in the premium mid-size crossover SUV category.

Meantime, Chevrolet's full-size Silverado dominated satisfaction ratings in both the light-duty and heavy-duty pickup truck classes.

What's a buyer to do?

I can't emphasize it enough: Make sure you know what each survey is measuring, because "satisfaction" can be arbitrarily defined to encompass a lot of variables.

And be sure to recognize the sizes of the survey groups. Remember, each year more than 15 million new cars, trucks and vans are purchased or leased in the United States, and there is a large variability in these purchases.

Automotive survey results

Car Shoppers' Five Best Brands (2007 Pied Piper PSI):

Acura

Land Rover

Saturn

Volkswagen

Nissan

Car Buyers' Five Best Brands (Power's 2006 SSI)

Jaguar

Cadillac

Lincoln

Porsche

Lexus

5 Top Dependability Brands (Power's 2006 Vehicle Dependability Study)

Lexus

Mercury

Buick

Cadillac

Toyota

Most Satisfying New Vehicles (2007 AutoPacific Vehicle Satisfaction Awards)

Car: 2007 Cadillac DTS

Truck: 2007 Lincoln MKX

Next week: Test driving Infiniti's new G37 coupe.

Have a car-related question? Write Ann M. Job, Features Department, The Star-Ledger, Newark, N.J. 07102-1200, or e-mail her at wheelwoman@starledger.com. Due to the volume of questions, there can be no personal replies. Ann Job will address some of the topics in her column.

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