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Mercedes, Lexus top ranking of U.S. dealerships



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DETROIT (Reuters) – Daimler AG's Mercedes and Toyota Motor Co's luxury Lexus brand topped a ranking intended to measure how well U.S. car shoppers were treated in dealer showrooms whether they bought a new car or not.

The survey released by Monterey, California-based sales consultancy Pied Piper showed Mercedes and Lexus in first and second place followed by Jaguar, Saturn and Land Rover.

The study ranked 14 brands below the industry average, including all three Ford Motor Co brands – Ford, Lincoln and Mercury – and all three brands with Chrysler Group LLC – Chrysler, Jeep and Dodge.

By contrast, three of the four brands that General Motors Co is keeping as part of the leaner operation that emerged from a federally sponsored bankruptcy scored above average – Cadillac, Chevy and GMC.

Fran O'Hagan, study author and president of Pied Piper, said up to 90 percent of U.S. car shoppers now walk out of car dealerships without buying, making satisfaction with the shopping experience very important in a declining market.

Three of the four brands GM is dropping were below average including Pontiac, Saab and Hummer.

The exception was Saturn, the highest ranking non-luxury car brand. GM is selling Saturn brand and its associated retail network to Roger Penske's Penske Automotive Group.

O'Hagan said Saturn's approach showed its no-haggle pricing policy still resonated with core consumers. "I think Saturn appeals to a number of those buyers," he said.

The lowest-ranked dealerships by brand were Mitsubishi Motors Corp, Pontiac, Saab, Jeep and Chrysler.

Three of the youngest auto brands also scored below average: BMW's Mini, Toyota's Scion and Smart, a joint-venture between Penske and Daimler.

"Those dealerships suffer from the museum curator approach, where sales people say you're welcome to look and I'll be happy to help you only when you're ready to buy," O'Hagan said.

The Pied Piper study, now in its third year, was based on the results from 3,531 paid researchers posing as car shoppers who rated dealerships on the qualities that actual car shoppers report as being important.

Jaguar and Land Rover are owned by Tata Motors Ltd.

Pied Piper clients include major automakers such as Honda Motor Co and Volkswagen AG as well as listed dealership groups Group 1 Automotive Inc and AutoNation.

(Reporting by Kevin Krolicki; editing by Leslie Gevirtz)