

The Wheel Deal

It's all about the product.

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Best Buy: 2009 Hyundai Genesis 3.8



Is the Hyundai Genesis the best \$36,000 car sold in the U.S.? For my money, it is, and I'm not alone. The 50-plus independent jurors of the North American Car of the Year awarded it first place this year. Very likely, it is the best car sold in the U.S. for under \$40,000.

There is a little game I play with myself. After driving a new car for awhile, I try to guess the sticker price.

I usually guess lower than the actual number because test cars come laden with options that aren't immediately visible to the naked eye. With some high-end German cars, I've been light by \$8,000 or \$9,000.

With the Genesis, I guessed high. Here is a car with the lines of an international luxury car, a slick interior with innovative leather trim on the instrument panel and a smoothly powerful V-6 engine. All the usual goodies were included, like shift-yourself automatic transmission, electronic stability control, and side-curtain airbags.

If the Hyundai wore a different badge on its trunk, I could easily see it selling for thousands more.

For real bargain shoppers, there is a \$33,000 Genesis available, but the additional three grand gets you nicer wheels, leather and a sunroof. My only complaint was squeaks in the dashboard that arose at highway speeds over rough surfaces.

The Genesis is just one reason why Hyundai sales are actually on the rise this year. Hyundai, its sister brand Kia, Subaru and Smart are the only manufacturers to show improvement through the first two months. Consumers, it would seem, are shopping for value, not for the cut-rate prices and cheap financing offered by larger automakers.

Speaking of value, there is no need to pop for the more powerful V-8 if you go Genesis shopping. The 290 horsepower V-6 scoots the Genesis to 60 miles per hour in 6.3 seconds, according to Edmunds.com, and delivers plenty of power at any speed. The EPA rates the fuel economy at 18 miles per gallon city, 27 mpg highway.

There is a moral behind Hyundai's success for anybody who is willing to listen. It has spent the last two decades rebuilding its reputation after disastrously entering the U.S. market in 1986 with disposable cars that it inflicted on poorly-capitalized buyers.

Hyundai has earned its good name by carefully listening to what customers want and then delivering more than they expect. There is nothing quick or easy about building a business that way, and the pressure to perform has taken its toll on the Korean automaker's American executives.

But customers are the winners, and the Genesis is the proof.