

Is Hyundai better than Toyota and Honda? New models suggest yes

By John Dodge | Jan 26, 2010 | [0 Comments](#)

Last week post's about my hesitation to buy an American vehicle brought out many opinions from SmartPlanet readers. So I've gone to an expert to find out the truth – or at least a scientific and surveyed opinion – about who makes the best and most reliable vehicles.



The expert is **Jake Fisher**, senior auto engineer for *Consumer Reports*. He spoke to me by phone from CR's Auto Test Center in East Haddam, Conn. His comments offer a glimpse into CR's upcoming 2010 annual rankings, which will be published in April.

My interview is in two parts, the second of which will be published tomorrow.

Part I looks at which marques makes the best vehicles – and which brands are the hard chargers that could pass the leaders in very short order.

Part II, to come tomorrow: Are hybrids worth it? Can American car makers catch up? Which cars are reliable and why? And the skinny on my the Chevy Silverado which made me hesitate to buy American.



Here's Part I:

SmartPlanet: Which companies makes the best cars?

Fisher: Generally, it's Honda and Toyota which jockey for position every year. Sometimes, it's a Lexus, Scion or Acura. Traditionally, it's been Japanese cars, Toyota, Honda and Subaru. Hyundai is really moving up the ladder fast. These are the companies that make the best cars and continue to do so.

SP: Will this be reflected in the 2010 rankings?

Fisher: Let me tell you what they are going to be. They're going to be really amazing (*Ed's note: Fisher bursts of laughter, because he had already said me he would not give me the scoop*). There will be some surprises, but we're not going to come out and say Chrysler is better than Toyota. There are some things that will change. We will have some [new] top picks.

SP: I'm guessing Fords and Hyundais, no?

Fisher: I am not at liberty to divulge. That would be a guess, though (*still laughing*).

SP: Tell me about Hyundai and to some extent, Kia.

Fisher: Hyundai has Toyota in the cross hairs and is getting there quick. Hyundai is poised to leapfrog Toyota in some ways.

SP: How?

Fisher: Ten years ago, Hyundai was an excellent value, but they were not as good. Then it came out with excellent interiors with nice fit and finish and materials. But their power trains weren't as powerful or fuel efficient. But the last generation of the Sonata was very fuel efficient, better than the Accord and it was quick.

But it was still boring and looked dull, quite frankly.

Hyundai just introduced a new Sonata at the LA Auto Show. And guess what? It has a different engine, is a great value, has a great interior and looks like a Mercedes Benz CLX (*Ed's note: And Hyundai knows it, too. A Super Bowl ad campaign will assert just that*). It's stylish now and something you want to drive as opposed to something you have to drive. No one rushes out to buy a Camry.

They're in are in a good position right now whether or not you're proud to buy a Hyundai or a Kia. The Korean electronic companies have gone from second to first tier and it hasn't taken that long.

SP: Is it true that in a way, Hyundai and Kia are trying to play Toyota's game better than Toyota?

Fisher: They're trying to jump on Honda and Toyotas coattails, producing vehicles very similar to Toyota. When you get a [Kia] trimline EX and there's a big EX on the hood, it's not hard to figure out who they are trying to be like. Kia uses EX and LX [to denote trimlines] which Honda has been using for 30 years.

SP: How much has Toyota's recent accelerator pedal recall hurt it?

Fisher: It's going hurt them more than it would another auto maker that had the same issue. People buy Toyotas because of the reliability. If it were the same with BMW, it would not have such an impact. People buy BMW's for the way they drive. People buy Toyotas because they are safe, efficient and reliable transportation, not because they are sexy. If you erode that, it's going to hurt them.

Quite frankly, the accelerator thing is a very small percentage of vehicles. But in the last several years, we've had some below average Toyota models in reliability. We'd never seen that before the 2007 survey. Before that, if it had a Toyota badge, it was going to be reliable. That's no longer true. Toyota has proven it's not perfect.

(Three hours after this was posted, Toyota announced it is suspending sales of eight models until it can fix the gas pedal problem).

SP: Was it one thing or variety of problems and which models?

Fisher: It was multiple issues...with a Camry V6, Tundra and a Lexus GS. Even now the all-wheel-drive Lexus GS is still below average in reliability.

SP: What about Honda? Has it stumbled less than Toyota?

Fisher: It has stumbled less, but has a much smaller product line and is a much smaller manufacturer. Toyota is trying to be the biggest auto maker in the world. Honda does not have big trucks and is more focused.

SP: Where do European car makers rank in reliability?

Fisher: Europeans have a lot of models that perform very well, but the reliability has been hit or miss. Most of them are fairly average in reliability.

SP: Can GM and Ford catch up?

Fisher: Yes, I think they can. GM has got a lot of work to do, but Ford has figured out how to make reliable cars on a model by model basis. Some of Ford's newer vehicles are maintaining reliability. So we'll see. For them, it's a matter when they redesign.