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Fancy cars spend more time in the shop, study says

By Earle Eldridge, USA TODAY

Despite steep prices and world-class images, new Mercedes-Benzes, BMWs, Cadillacs, Land Rovers, Jaguars and Saabs are more likely to spend time in a dealership for repair work than many cheaper cars, a J.D. Power and Associates survey found.



Land Rover's 2003 Range Rover.

According to the survey, which measured what percentage of service visits to dealerships were for repairs rather than maintenance, nine of 13 luxury brands scored worse than the industry average of 35%. Worst of 37 brands in the survey: Land Rover, with 62% of service calls for repairs.

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Meantime, mass-market brand Buick tops the list at 21%.

Buick	38%	21%
Honda	31%	22%
Toyota	25%	22%
Lexus	36%	24%
Acura	30%	25%
Mitsubishi	37%	28%
Suzuki	39%	29%
Saturn	39%	31%
Infiniti	29%	31%
Mazda	35%	32%
Isuzu	53%	33%
Pontiac	46%	33%
Lincoln	35%	33%
Mercury	34%	34%
Chevrolet	44%	35%
Nissan	36%	35%
Total industry	41%	35%
Dodge	47%	36%
Plymouth	46%	37%
Ford	43%	37%

Power asked 106,000 owners of vehicles up to 3 years old whether their service visits to dealerships were for repair work or maintenance. Power provided the results only to automakers. USA TODAY obtained one of the automaker reports.

Repairs do not include routine maintenance or replacement of items that routinely wear out, like brakes and wiper blades.

Overall, the industry average improved from 41% repair work in 1999. But Mercedes owners said they visited dealerships 48% of the time for repairs in 2003, up from 43% in 1999.

Scott Keogh, a Mercedes spokesman, says some of the owners surveyed may have confused routine maintenance with repair work. A dashboard warning light in a Mercedes identifies low windshield-washer fluid as a malfunction instead of maintenance, for instance, which could make owners think repair work is needed, he says.

Land Rover officials blamed its results on increased sales that have outpaced the number of service bays at dealerships. That, in turn, frustrates customers, Land Rover says.

David Champion, director of auto testing for *Consumer Reports* magazine, says the quality of European luxury brands suffered after the automakers began making new types of vehicles, like sport-utility vehicles, and building new plants in the USA. That may mean more repairs.

Trying to build affordable cars may have hurt the luxury brands, too, he

said.

Oldsmobile	40%	40%
Kia	58%	41%
Saab	52%	42%
Cadillac	42%	42%
GMC	48%	43%
Subaru	41%	43%
Hyundai	46%	44%
Jaguar	49%	45%
BMW	55%	47%
Volvo	52%	47%
Porsche	46%	47%
Daewoo	NA	48%
Mercedes-Benz	43%	48%
Chrysler	54%	49%
Jeep	48%	49%
Audi	58%	51%
Volkswagen	45%	53%
Land Rover	73%	62%

"As soon as you take costs out, unless it's done carefully, it can create quality problems," Champion says. "Most of the problems for the luxury brands seem to be with the electrical system, which is an area where you can cut costs, but quality suffers."

Aggravating the problem for luxury brands is that buyers finally able to afford their dream cars have higher expectations of the vehicles, says Art Spinella of CNW Market/Research.

"If you have a rattle in your Chevrolet, it's OK. But if you have a rattle in your Mercedes, you go back to the dealership," he says.

Source: J.D. Power and Associates

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