

Hybrids are becoming mainstream

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Hybrid gasoline-electric vehicles are rapidly becoming mainstream choices for American consumers, say researchers at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute (UMTRI) and HybridCars.com.

"The first buyers were motivated by the novelty of the technology, but today's shoppers are more interested in tangible benefits, such as saving fuel, reducing emissions or reducing dependence on oil," said Walter McManus, director of UMTRI's Office for the Study of Automotive Transportation (OSAT).

McManus and colleague Brad Berman, editor of Web site HybridCars.com, surveyed more than 1,500 visitors to HybridCars.com from December 2004 to March 2005 to learn about consumer attitudes and views of hybrid vehicles. More than a third of the respondents said they own a hybrid and most of the rest said they were in the market for one.

The survey found that while owners of hybrids were less likely than other recent buyers of new vehicles to have owned a sport-utility vehicle or pickup truck in the past five years, nearly 40 percent of the survey's "hybrid shoppers" have owned an SUV and about 25 percent have owned a truck.

"The first wave of hybrid owners, who were satisfied with smaller vehicle options, are being joined by consumers wanting to keep their SUVs or large sedans---and not get stung by rising gas prices," Berman said. "Hybrids have quickly shifted from a feel-good ideological

purchase to a bottom-line, cost-conscious decision. Hybrids cars are clearly going mainstream."

According to the survey, saving money on gas and cutting down on air pollution were the top two reasons for owning a hybrid (this was true for both owners and shoppers of hybrids). Reducing dependency on foreign oil and emitting less climate-changing carbon dioxide were other main reasons for owning a hybrid (for both groups). However, owners of hybrids were far more likely than shoppers to say they liked the design and technology of hybrid vehicles.

The new and anticipated hybrid SUVs---Ford Escape, Lexus RX 400h, Toyota Highlander---also are attracting more mainstream customers, the researchers say.

"These new hybrids are rapidly rising on the hybrid shopping list, although the smaller Toyota Prius remains at the top," McManus said. "Trust in the brand, technology, fuel economy, design, styling and performance are what motivated current owners to buy the specific model they did. And the Prius scores well on all these dimensions."

Toyota's New Prius was the highest-rated hybrid. Other leading models include the Honda Accord, Honda Civic, Honda Insight, Ford Escape and Toyota Prius Classic. Today's shoppers look for hybrid models with high fuel economy, value for the price, a trusted brand name and good performance, McManus and Berman say.

The survey also included a detailed assessment of quality as perceived by owners, including likes and dislikes, whether the owner would recommend the model to a friend or plans to buy another hybrid in the future, and five-point ratings in six categories: mechanical, body and interior, features and accessories, performance, creature comforts and style.

Fear of higher maintenance costs was the most frequently cited dislike, a fact that has taken on greater urgency for manufacturers since the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration is investigating complaints by some Prius drivers that the car stalls at highway speeds, the researchers say.

Source: University of Michigan

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