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50% OF SA CAR OWNERS REPORT NO PROBLEMS

Almost half of all new car owners in South Africa at present reported no problems at all with their new vehicle. Of those new car owners with problems, noise levels seem to be the one thing that bothers car owners no matter how expensive their car is.

This is according to the 2005 Synovate Quality Awards results released on 21 October. The survey is based on interviews conducted with approximately 55 000 vehicle owners on an annual basis, and measures the number of problems (PP100: problems per 100 vehicles) new car owners experience with their vehicles in the first few months of ownership.

According to Synovate's Chief Operating Officer for the Middle East and Africa, Albert McLean, of the four broad categories, namely Noise Levels, Static Functional Problems, Dynamic Functional Problems and Appearance, it was noise that was the biggest contributor to the problem count.

Within this broad category, three sources of noise are measured – wind noise, squeaks and rattles, and road noise. The latter is not a major cause for concern – it is rather the wind noise and, more irritatingly, the squeaks and rattles, which wound up the volume.

“Car manufacturers have long battled to eliminate wind noise, and although improved, a large proportion of new car owners still identified wind noise as a problem,” said McLean. “Nevertheless, this area has shown considerable improvement over the years, and has not been highlighted as a major irritant.”

The same cannot be said for squeaks and rattles. While this may seem illogical – after all, it is not related to the performance of the vehicle in any way -- a constant, infuriating little squeak can have a very negative impact on the whole ownership experience. So how common are squeaks and rattles in the new vehicles of today?

Well, that does depend on the vehicle in question. Money apparently does buy some happiness as, on average, only one in every six luxury vehicles will report a squeak or rattle in their new vehicle. Those with a little less to spend increase their odds of a squeak or rattle – the average amongst the volume

models is around the one in three mark. Isolate that further to just the Entry segments and they increase yet again – here almost every second vehicle would have a squeak or rattle

Primarily responsible were the windows and doors, and the dash or instrumentation areas. Light Commercial Vehicles report similar numbers to the Volume segments with a squeak or rattle plaguing almost a third of the new owners.

“Interestingly, the luxury vehicles have had less success at eliminating road noise – in fact reporting a slightly higher count than other models. However, considering the bigger engine sizes, and perhaps higher travelling speeds, this is not totally unexpected,” said McLean.

Looking beyond Noise Levels, the Appearance and Static Functional areas did not contribute significantly to the total count. Even amongst the mass produced models, fewer than a quarter of owners experienced any static functional problems – and this includes water leaks, dust leaks, and any problems with the ventilation or the functional aspects such as lights, central locking, the sound system and the windscreen wipers. In fact, improvements have reached the stage where these sorts of problems are quite rare.

Functional Dynamic problems, although not very common, are nevertheless a serious issue as these can have safety implications – or affect the primary purpose of the vehicle, its ability to drive.

“Overall, around a quarter of all volume car buyers will report a functional dynamic problem, compared to a fifth of luxury car owners,” said McLean. “While this may sound like a lot, the seriousness of these problems does vary.”

For example, noise during shifting gears or an oil leak - although far from desirable on a new vehicle - are unlikely to have significant safety implications. The category also covers a wide range of potential problems, and there are no specific problems that emerged as ‘likely’ faults on a new vehicle.

As an example, the most common dynamic-related faults on new volume-produced vehicles were difficulty in engaging gears (four in every one hundred reported this) and noise during braking (three in every one hundred experienced this). On a segment level, the segments reporting the most Functional Dynamic faults were the entry segment (again), the top sedan segment and the small recreational vehicles.

Functional Dynamic problems were slightly more common amongst the Light Commercial vehicles – overall the problem count for LCVs tends to be slightly higher. This may suggest that there is less attention given to the LCV models in a brand’s line-up, but is more likely a function of application, says McLean. “While a pick-up is more likely to play the role of a passenger vehicle nowadays, these vehicles by their very nature are still workhorses. As working vehicles, their capabilities – or problems therewith – will be tested and noted perhaps before this occurred with the less-strenuously utilised passenger vehicles.”

Comparing the problems reported to those issued in 2004, there appeared to be no real significant change in any particular area. Nor are great leaps in quality likely in the near future.

According to McLean, this does not mean that manufacturers have stopped their efforts in this area, but is because the room for improvement has gradually reduced as quality improves.

“While talk revolves around the elusive zero-defect vehicle, the reality is that this is likely to stay out of reach for some time yet as the sheer mechanics and human elements in the process preclude achieving perfection every time.”

“Nevertheless, around half of all new car owners in South Africa at present reported no problems at all with their new vehicle, and even small levels of improvement are an achievement.”

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About Synovate

Synovate, the market research arm of Aegis Group plc, generates consumer insights that drive competitive marketing solutions. The network provides clients with cohesive global support and a comprehensive suite of research solutions. Synovate employs almost 5,000 staff in 46 countries. Synovate in South Africa was formerly known as Proactive Insight. More information on Synovate can be found at www.synovate.com and www.synovate.co.za

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