150 problems for every 100 vehicles sold - should we be too scared to buy a new car?

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The past few weeks have seen the release of research results by Synovate relating to the quality of new vehicles sold in South Africa - the first time this sort of information has been available here.

Importantly, the publication of this research is endorsed by the dti to promote competitive and socially responsible business,

Synovate, formerly known as Proactive Insight, is now part of one of the five largest research companies in the world. The company employs over 360 people in South Africa and conducts the largest competitive customer satisfaction survey in the country's automotive market.

As part of a survey which involves interviewing approximately 55 000 new vehicle owners each year, this study is aimed at identifying problems experienced by the new owners. This knowledge is then applied by engineers in finding solutions and working towards the ideal 'zero-defect' product. Considering that a total count of 274 problems is possible, and the complexity of the modern car, the average reported by customers of 1.5 problems is very low - especially given the 40% decline in problems in the past five years. "Although motor manufacturers have many other issues to contend with in today's competitive market, the quality of vehicles continues to improve each year" said Albert McLean, managing director of Synovate. "Nevertheless, any problems can seriously dampen the delight felt by a new owner, and further improvements remain a top priority."

Okay, so there are still problems. But are all problems equal? Signing on the dotted line for a new vehicle may be less pleasurable if you are aware that you have a very high chance of experiencing a gearbox malfunction within the next four months. On the other hand, a chance of a wrinkle in the lining of the boot or a drip in the paint is less likely to be a concern. So what exactly makes up the reported 1.5 problems for every vehicle sold?

Noise, it seems, is the main culprit, accounting for almost half of the reported problems in Passenger, Light Commercial and Recreational vehicles. Perhaps not as serious as a mechanical breakdown, a persistent squeak can however prove very irritating. In fact, research by Synovate has shown that a squeak or rattle is three times as irritating as wind noise, in the eyes of the South African driver. Roughly one in four owners will experience a squeak or rattle, and this is most likely to come from a door or window, one of the seats, or the dashboard. On the bright side, squeaks and rattles have diminished by a sizeable 40.4% since 1999.

Considering how many gadgets, knobs and buttons there are in the average vehicle nowadays, it is not surprising to find that this is the next most common area for problems. Still, don't reject that model with the electric windows and central locking - despite all the possible problems with the functional aspects, only one or two new cars out of every ten will report any problems with either the electrically or manually operated items. An interesting aside - more gadgets and buttons does not necessarily equate to more problems - the luxury brands reported far fewer problems with any of these aspects despite having far more potential problem areas.

Typically, new buyers would be most concerned with the functional dynamic aspects - the gearbox, brakes, steering - the aspects around the actual performance and safety of the vehicle. Most common are difficulty in changing or engaging gears (when vehicle is cold), a constant pull to one side (typically the left) and noisy brakes. Having said that these are most common, it must be clarified that this means that around two in every 100 vehicles are likely to report each of these problems. Not bad, I think you'll agree. Light Commercial Vehicles report a few additional problem areas, including poor fuel consumption (2 Problems per 100 vehicles), noisy suspension (front and rear each 2 PP100) and vibration and

shudder while braking (2 PP100)

Having pointed out where a new vehicle may give problems, it is worthwhile looking at areas where the vehicle manufacturers have really got it right, as they strive towards the 'zero-defect' ideal.

With one or two brands being the exception, automatic transmission is nearing perfection. You could truly count yourself unlucky if you encountered an oil leak or overheating in the gearbox, noise during shifting or transmission shifting too early or too late. Similarly, problems with the difflock and with engaging 4x4 are certainly far less likely than in the past.

Given South Africa's extreme climate - dry and dusty one minute, torrential storms the next - dust and water leaks were a real problem for many manufacturers and new vehicle owners in the past. Not so anymore - fewer than one in twenty passenger car owners will report any dust or water leaks whatsoever. These were slightly higher - dust leaks in particular - amongst the Light Commercial and Recreational vehicles, no doubt because of the nature of these vehicles and where they are driven.

With Synovate recording a forty percent decline in the total count of problems, there is no doubt that manufacturers are taking quality seriously. Looking at the detail, there is no particular area / aspect where you are likely to experience a problem - in fact, a substantial number of new owners report absolutely no problems at all. As McLean says "While differences in quality do exist from brand to brand, a manufacturer who cannot produce products that conform to the 'norm' of today will not survive, the market is just too competitive". So today's new car vehicle buyer can rest assured that, in general, they are buying a top quality product.

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