

Technology trumps performance for many car buyers

Car technology features related to driver safety and convenience have increased significantly in the last few years, even in entry-level models regarded as budget cars.

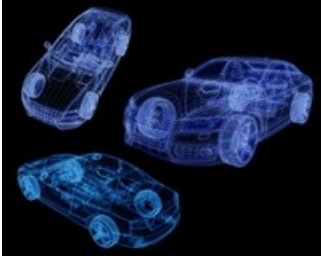


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The growing popularity of consumer electronics and the uptake of smartphone functionalities have intertwined motoring with the so-called "connected life". Even facing economic pressures, consumers seem reluctant to settle for much lower technology spec vehicles.

Car Magazine has recently announced its annual Top 12 Best Buys for 2014, sponsored this year by Tracker. In producing the 15th instalment of Car's annual awards programme, the magazine's editors cast their votes for the best vehicles in 12 categories of the South African new vehicle market. The Top 12 Best Buys appears in the March 2014 issue of the magazine and the list of category winners appear in conjunction with readers' choices as determined by an online poll.

According to Car Magazine's editor, Steve Smith, manufacturers that offer features such as ABS with electronic brake-force distribution, driver and front passenger (or more) airbags, climate control, USB-compatible audio systems and Bluetooth hands-free mobile phone connectivity as standard on most of their vehicles, have recently achieved tremendous sales success.

"For example, the flagship model of the winner in the Top 12 Best Buys for 2014: Light Sedan category, the Kia Rio 1,4 TEC, offers climate control, USB-compatible audio systems and Bluetooth, plus LED running lamps, automatic headlamp/wiper activation and more. Impressive for a B-segment car," he said.

Green i3

In terms of leading technological innovation, the BMW i3, the winner of Car's Green Award, is an obvious example of future technology that is already available. Smith explained: "BMW has created an all-new i-brand and, rather than converting existing models to electric (or hybrid) powertrains, it started with a clean sheet of paper and followed a holistic approach to unlock efficiency gains.

The i3 marks the first time that carbon-fibre is used as the material of choice for body-in-white structure in a high-production vehicle, which helps to reduce the vehicle's weight, including batteries, to only 1195kg."

The i3 is undoubtedly in a technology league of its own and a host of extra features - including its intermodal navigation system, the first in-car service to integrate public transport options with using the road network to reach one's final destination - serve to further position it as market leading.

Tracker's marketing and strategy director, Michael du Preez, said: "Technology helps us to address consumer needs in new ways and more effectively, and it's our intense focus on these evolving needs that has led to our partnerships with manufacturers to deliver converged services that are redefining the way customers make purchase decisions. Safety and savings features have never offered a more compelling proposition to consumers than today."

Safety paramount

For CarMagazine, the provision of passive safety equipment - such as the number of airbags offered as standard - over and above systems that enable drivers to avoid having road accidents is paramount, especially in the compact hatch and sedan segments of the market and more affordable vehicles.

Smith commented: "Vehicles that offer better combinations of performance, efficiency, safety and convenience technology than rivals of similar prices score highly in terms of value for money and, as a result, tend to achieve higher overall road test scores and win categories of the Car Top 12 Best Buys."

At the top end and scooping Car's Top 12 Best luxury sedan award, the Mercedes-Benz S-Class sets the benchmark for innovative safety systems across the entire new vehicle market.

Much of the S-Class's safety technology combines cameras and multi-stage radar to create a 360-degree scanning field to anticipate potentially dangerous scenarios. Dubbed Intelligent Drive, this suite comprises such systems as Distronic Plus with Steering Assist and Stop & Go Pilot - radar that locks on to the car in front and follows it, even in traffic. Also camera-guided braking detects side traffic as well as pedestrians (called BAS Plus) and updated night vision with thermal imaging and auto high-beam flash warns pedestrians in the road of the approaching car.

Smith said: "Even entry-level S-Class models feature a Pre-Safe Impulse system that pulls the driver and passenger away from the direction of impact by their seat belts at an early phase of the crash, and a multi-sensor-driven collision-prevention system that detects any car approaching a stationary S-Class too quickly. The system activates the hazard lights to catch the other driver's attention and activates the brakes so that, should a collision occur, you don't hit the car in front of yours."

He added: "These impressive systems do beg the question as to whether the next S-Class will see us creeping towards near-autonomous driving that could eventually see the driver disconnected from most aspects of motoring!"

Technology responsible for the many performance gains

Autonomous driving aside, there is little doubt that technology is responsible for the many performance gains, but also efficiencies, already evident in cars being produced today. When Car performance tests vehicles for the purposes of compiling road tests, active safety systems, such as anti-lock braking (ABS), electronic brake-force distribution and emergency braking assistance, play important roles when its testers record the fastest possible times that vehicles take to stop from 100km/h.

Engine and transmission technologies, such as turbo or supercharging, advancements in variable valve timing, dual-clutch gearboxes and continuously variable transmissions, aided by lightweight body construction and aerodynamic gains, have seen the engine outputs produced and performance figures achieved by vehicles tested by Car improve with every generation.

But, according to Smith, these performance gains have not come at the cost of efficiency: stop-start technology, cylinder-deactivation and kinetic energy recovery systems, to name but a few, have seen fuel consumption figures recorded during Car's fuel route tests compare well to manufacturers' claims and the Car Fuel Index.

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