

Malibu offers a lot of value

Continued from 14B

tested price is a pretty reasonable \$17,924.

Chevy has done a good job in designing the Malibu, which could easily give its own Lumina a run for its money. If

the quality is kept high, there will be a lot of folks who may revisit the nameplate.

Sales of new cars drop for Big Three

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27,427 Accords.

Automakers in general face a soft U.S. market this year because Americans have less need to replace their vehicles than in months past, Ms. Jacobs said. As a result, she said, the country is being

"blanketed" with buyer incentives.

The baby boom is starting to move past child rearing, which means they have less need for larger vehicles, she said. Minivan sales have already begun to plateau, Ms. Jacobs said.

However, Bradley said that while the dip in U.S. sales may last a few months, he's optimistic for the longer term.

"The economy is fairly robust and healthy," he said. "I don't see any reason why we shouldn't continue to see robust sales in the future."

RVs allow families to travel together

Continued from 14B

"The demographics of the country are changing, with the population getting a little older and motor homes fitting into the laid-back lifestyle a lot of people want," said McNulty.

Gregg Lewis, co-owner of Lewis Auto and RV Sales, said RV sales are climbing back to the peak level of the mid-1970s.

Prices for a new motorized RV start at \$30,000 and can go

as high as \$250,000 depending on how many luxury items are installed. Some of the "Class A" motor homes have gourmet kitchens, dining rooms and built-in entertainment centers.

Quality improving across car industry

Continued from 14B

take what they have learned in producing high-quality, low-volume vehicles and apply these concepts to the production of high-volume vehicles," said Chance Parker, product research director.

J.D. Power also said the quality gap between cars and light trucks largely vanished in 1997 because of big gains in the new crop of pickups and midsize sport utility vehicles. Ford's redesigned F-series pickups, for example, scored 64 problems per 100 units compared with 114 for the 1996 model.

But significantly poorer scores still exist within other segments of the truck market, such as minivans and small and large sport utilities, Parker said.

The firm releases only the top three ranking vehicles in

each of 11 car and truck categories.

Among the 33 top-ranking vehicles, 24 have Japanese nameplates and nine are Big Three products. Some of the Japanese models, such as the Honda Civic and Accord and Nissan pickup, are made in the United States. No European vehicles made the list.

Toyota had the most top-ranked vehicles with 11, followed by Honda with seven, General Motors with six, Nissan with five, Ford with three and Chrysler with one.

In recent years, the Big Three have noted their improving scores while disputing the significance of their lower overall ranking compared with the Japanese. They say the differences have become statistically insignif-

cant.

"This study continues to confirm that quality is no longer a major discriminator and that key satisfaction factors ... are now such things as styling, features, safety, price and the dealer showroom and service experience," said Ron Haas, GM vice president of quality.

Parker said the origin of the vehicle is less significant today that it was years ago. He noted that quality scores vary more today model by model - most automakers have some that score high and others that rank low.

J.D. Power sells its survey information to automakers and others in the industry. Manufacturers use the information in advertising and to compare with their own quality and customer-satisfaction measures.

Gas guzzlers a concern

By Catherine Strong
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - The government could fine General Motors Corp. more than \$45 million in the next few years for failing to meet the federal fuel economy standard for sport utility vehicles, pickup trucks and minivans.

Automakers cite a clash between the consumer love affair with larger vehicles and the government's standard that requires light trucks - sport utility vehicles, pickups and minivans - to get 20.7 miles per gallon on average.

GM, Chrysler Corp. and Ford Motor Co. all have struggled during the past few years with the standard. GM's light trucks fell below the standard in 1993 and stayed below until 1996. Chrysler has been below the standard since 1994 and Ford since last year.

The outcome for GM is still up in the air. The company may be able to avoid penalties for its light trucks by claiming credits for beating the standard in previous or planning to do so in future years.

"We are taking some steps to avoid these non-compliance problems. What the future holds is still questionable," said GM spokesman Randy Fox.

The fine would be the largest ever levied under the law, and the first for a domestic automaker. Mercedes-Benz has paid fines as large as \$25.9 million for making gas guzzlers.

The increasing popularity of larger sport utility vehicles and the continued high sales of pickup trucks - both of which get less gas mileage than minivans - are holding down the fuel economy average, the companies say.

"Consumer demand for bigger sport utility vehicles is beginning to create problems for all three of the domestic manufacturers," said GM lobbyist Mark Kemmer.

Chrysler spokesman Jason Vines said the

standard "puts us at war with our customers."

But Daniel Becker of the Sierra Club calls the standard "the biggest single step to curbing global warming and probably the most successful energy-saving law ever created."

All three companies say they are taking advantage of the flexibility of the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) law. It allows companies to use credits from beating the standard in the three prior years or to anticipate credits in the next three years.

Thus, GM has until the end of this year to avoid a potential fine of roughly \$100,000 for 1994. The big hurdle for GM is the potential 1995 fine of more than \$45 million, which would not be incurred until the end of 1998.

GM officials decline to specify how they would stay within the law. But they suggest new gas-saving technologies could help them out of the fuel-efficiency bind.

"We're all working on technologies that we hope, even on the current size vehicles, can help squeeze out a few more tenths of a gallon here and there," said Kemmer.

Credits or fines are calculated through a complex formula involving vehicle sales and how many tenths of a gallon away the light trucks are on average from the average fuel economy. GM sold 1.9 million so-called light trucks in 1995 and missed the target of 20.7 mpg by 0.5 mpg on average.

Congress enacted CAFE in 1975 to help reduce American dependency on foreign oil after the 1973 oil embargo crisis. The standard for trucks was 14 mpg in 1980 and gradually increased to 20.5 mpg by the late 1980s.

The fuel economy standard is 27.5 miles per gallon for cars. The Big Three, for the most part, have met that standard.



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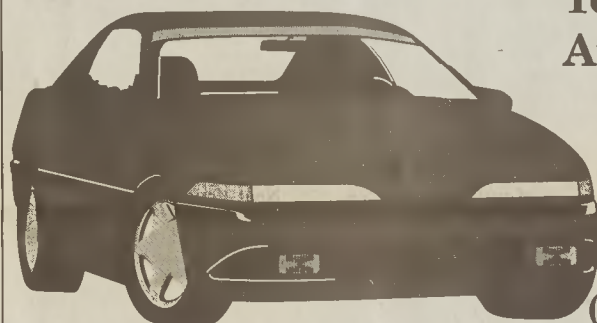
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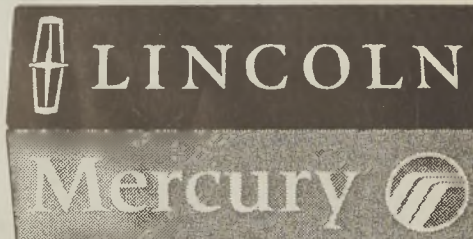


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