

Infiniti dominates in service satisfaction

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Infiniti, Nissan's luxury brand, edged out Saturn for the top spot in this year's J.D. Power and Associates study of customer satisfaction with dealership service.

Lincoln had a surprise showing, jumping to a third-place tie with Lexus and Acura after placing 11th last year. Lexus had held the No. 1 position for five years straight until being unseated by Saturn last year.

In another big move, Audi rose from below the industry average to above the average.

The annual J.D. Power Customer Service Index Study focuses on consumer experiences with dealer service departments during the first three years of vehicle ownership, which typically represents the majority of vehicle warranty periods. The study is based on responses of nearly 106,000 new-vehicle owners and lessees.

Infiniti, which placed second in last year's study, has reliable vehicles, so most of the brand's service business is in the form of maintenance work, according to the Westlake Village, Calif., market research firm. The brand scored 900 out of a possible 1,000 points on the index. The industry average is 851 points.

Fixed right first time

"Infiniti's strongest suit is fixing it right the first time and things relating to that — the quality of the diagnosis and the thoroughness in making sure that everything that was promised gets done," says Joe Ivers, a partner and executive director of quality and customer satisfaction at J.D. Power.

If a repair is involved, the service quality is top notch, he says. If it is only maintenance, Infiniti's strength is getting the customer in and out of the service department quickly.

Audi, whose U.S. sales are up from the 1990s, had been having trouble keeping up with its customer service needs, Ivers says.

"Audi has been a sort of poster child of big success and rapid sales growth but has been really choking on all those customers," Ivers says. "You had a painfully long wait to get an appointment."

Ivers attributes Audi's 29-point improvement to building more service capacity in the dealerships and finding more efficient ways to schedule customers.

Shorter waits

"The customers are reporting a whole lot less time that they have to wait to actually get into the dealership," he says.

Mercedes-Benz also had a 29-point jump in this year's study, lifting the franchise above the industry average. Like Audi, Mercedes-Benz is doing a better job of getting customers in more quickly for service appointments.

From an industry perspective, quality improvements across the industry are driving down the need for warranty repairs at new-vehicle dealerships, transforming the nature of the dealer service business, Ivers says.

The study finds that the balance of work at dealerships is tilting more toward regular scheduled maintenance as opposed to repairs. The mix of routine maintenance business has increased to 57 percent in 2003 from 47 percent in 1999.

Other shifts worth noting:

- Lincoln improved the time it takes to speak to a service adviser, completed repairs or maintenance quicker and made the payment process easier. Lincoln also did a better job of keeping the service department clean.

"It's going to give them some bragging rights that they are tied with Lexus," Ivers says.

- Land Rover plunged 33 points, dipping below the industry average. Land Rover's biggest challenge involves product quality rather than dealership service.

"Land Rover has a consistent pattern of vehicle durability challenges,"

How brands rank

Here are the results of J.D. Power's 2003 and 2002 Customer Service Index studies measuring consumer satisfaction with dealership service during the first 3 years of vehicle ownership. Scores are based on a 1,000-point scale.

	2003	2002
1. Infiniti	900	897
2. Saturn	896	900
3. Acura	895	881
3. Lexus	895	894
3. Lincoln	895	868
6. Cadillac	893	890
7. Saab	892	875
8. Buick	889	882
9. Porsche	874	864
10. BMW	873	873
11. Jaguar	868	867
11. M-B	868	839
11. Volvo	868	883
14. Mercury	867	862
15. Oldsmobile	863	868
16. Chevrolet	858	846
16. GMC	858	844
18. Chrysler	857	856
19. Honda	854	859
20. Audi	852	823
21. Jeep	851	838
Industry average	851	843
22. Pontiac	849	841
23. Plymouth	846	832
24. Dodge	845	829
24. Ford	845	822
26. Mazda	841	828
26. Subaru	841	830
28. Toyota	838	849
29. Mitsubishi	833	808
30. Hyundai	832	830
31. Nissan	831	826
32. Land Rover	812	845
33. Volkswagen	795	787
34. Kia	786	772
35. Suzuki	781	745
36. Isuzu	780	767
37. Daewoo	737	791

Source: J.D. Power and Associates, industry sources for below-average scores in 2002 study

Ivers says. "They have been plagued for many years with a high rate of need for repair." **AN**