

Rick Paul (left) and Dave Campion (center) released the 2009 *Consumer Reports Auto Issue* at the February WAPA meeting moderated by 2009 WAPA President Rick Trawick.



TOYOTA TOPS CR'S BEST domestics take one category

What's the best overall value in the 300 new cars on the market today? Consumer Reports created a new category for tough times seeking the one model that had the best road test scores, highest reliability and lowest owner cost, best fuel economy and highest resale value and choose the Toyota Prius. Its comparatively low owner-cost estimate of \$26,250 over five years—and a road-test score of 80 points out of 100. The Prius doesn't have the least expensive sticker price in its class, but its excellent fuel economy of 42 mpg overall and solid resale value help give it a low owner cost, explained Rick Paul Automotive Editor at Consumer Reports at the February WAPA meeting.

To determine which cars are the best values, CR looks at its overall road-test scores, five-year owner-cost estimates, and

predicted reliability ratings for more than 300 recently tested vehicles. CR then divided each vehicle's five-year owner cost by its overall road-test score to get the cost of each test-score point—the lower the cost per point, the better the value. To ensure the vehicles named as best values were also models that held up well over time, choices were limited to those with above-average predicted reliability ratings. CR's owner-cost estimates are based on six major elements: depreciation, fuel economy, insurance, interest on financing, maintenance and repair, and sales tax.

"A low price doesn't necessarily make a car a good value," said Paul. "At a time when people need to make every dollar

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count, our best value list will help consumers understand the difference.”

Rounding out the top five models with the best overall value were the Mini Cooper (\$330) Volkswagen Rabbit (\$330), Honda Civic EX (\$340), and Honda Fit (\$350). Five small cars, the Mazda Miata, and the Toyota Camry Hybrid follow with results ranging from \$340 to \$365 cost per test-score point. One of those cars, the redesigned Honda Fit had the best owner-cost estimate on CR's best value list, only \$24,000 over five years.

Consumer Reports' Top Picks are the best all-around models in their categories and must meet stringent road test, reliability, and safety requirements. Each Top Pick scores at or near the top of its category. This year's top picks are;

- Small Sedan: Hyundai Elantra SE (\$18,695)
- Mid-sized SUV: Toyota Highlander. (\$26,000 to \$41,000)
- Pickup: Chevrolet Avalanche. (\$36,000 to \$47,000) i
- Best Overall: Lexus LS 460. (\$64,000 to \$77,000)
- Family Sedan: Honda Accord. (\$21,000 to \$31,000)
- Upscale Sedan: Infiniti G37. (\$33,000 to \$36,000, formerly G35)
- Fun to Drive: Mazda MX-5 Miata. (\$22,000 to \$29,000)
- Small SUV: Toyota RAV4. (\$23,000 to \$30,000)
- Minivan: Toyota Sienna. (\$26,000 to \$38,000)
- Green Car: Toyota Prius. (\$22,000 to \$24,000)

For the third consecutive year, Honda got the nod for building the best all-around vehicles for American drivers, according to CR's annual Automaker Report Cards. At the opposite end of the annual ranking is Chrysler, which fared even worse than last year. The company's poor performing products and sinking reliability results have kept all Chrysler, Dodge, and Jeep badged vehicles off CR's Recommended list.

With an overall score of 78 out of 100 points, Honda was followed closely by Subaru (75), and Toyota (74) in the overall score. Subaru is also the only automaker with 100% of its tested

vehicles Recommended, although it has a relatively small model lineup. Mazda (73), came in 4th followed by Mercedes-Benz, Nissan, Volkswagen, and BMW, all tied at 72. While the top four overall scores belong to Japanese automakers, a Japanese nameplate is no guarantee that every car in a model range will

be a reliable and good performer. For example, the Honda Element and Toyota Yaris scored too low in Consumer Reports' tests to be recommended. Conversely, despite overall scores of 63 and 57 respectively, that placed Ford and GM toward the bottom of the results, new models like the Ford Flex, F-150, Chevrolet Malibu, and Cadillac CTS have done well in CR's tests and rank near the top of their classes in its ratings.

Although no domestic automaker showed up in any of the best value rankings, Dave Champion Senior Director of Automotive testing said that Ford made substantial improvements in reliability, but older Ford models continue to drag down the automaker's overall score. "Unfortunately," Champion said, "their vehicles are low on consumer appeal. The interior trim is bland and styling is so-so."

GM, he said, also has reliability problems. The Malibu is above average on the first year, but the CTS and three-row SUVs are below average. "If GM can fix its Achilles heel—reliability, it has some good vehicles coming out including the La Cross, Equinox and SRX." he said. He had no such words of encouragement for Chrysler. Their vehicles, he said, are noisy, with cheap interiors, uncomfortable seats, are noncompetitive in their class and below average in reliability. The only bright spot in their line up, Champion said, is the Ram Pickup.

Asked to give his opinions on the green car future, Champion said it was only a wild guess, but since the U.S. is such a large country with varying needs and challenges, four areas of the country may find unique solution. For instance: battery hybrids fit the Northeast where fewer miles are driven in heavily congested traffic; with more nascent infrastructure for hydrogen and greater commuting distances hydrogen fuel cell fits the West Coast; with farm bio mass, the Midwest might develop purpose-built ethanol and the Southeast with its prevailing humidity could move toward bacterial bio-diesel.

Whatever the outcome, Champion said that the consumer has to understand that the internal combustion engine is "wonder of technology and there is a possibility of getting 15 to 20 percent better fuel economy from it in the future. Consumers must realize," he said, "anything we go to in the future is not going to be as good as what we drive today."

Automakers are striving for a solution, but Champion said the oil companies are missing at the table. "At one point, they said they would pick up the pace of developing alternative fuel sources. But from what I've seen, they are just making the big profits and disappearing into their shells."



(From top) CR dubbed the Lexus Lsh 460 as the best overall value. The Chevrolet Avalanche was the only domestic model to make a top pick. The Toyota Prius was crowned top Green Car. The Toyota Matrix takes on the avoidance test at CR headquarters test track.

WAPA Grapevine...

Sandy Lynch has new contact information with STI Fleet Services. contact her at: sjlynch@stifleet.com, 703 378 9264 Office 410 960 8003 cell; address: 14805 Willard Road, Suite M, Chantilly, VA 20151.

The Presidential Task Force on Autos includes: Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, White House National Economic Council director Larry Summers, as well as the secretaries of Transportation, Commerce, Labor, Energy, OMB director, EPA administrator, director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change and chair of the Council of Economic Advisors. Naming cabinet-level secretaries to the task force is a change of plans for the administration. Staff designees include; Diana Farrell, deputy director of National Economic Council; Gene Sperling, counselor to the Treasury Secretary; Jared Bernstein, chief economist to Vice President Joe Biden; and Joan DeBoer, chief of staff at the Transportation Department.

According to the *Detroit News*, Lisa Heinzerling, senior climate policy council to EPA administrator Lisa Jackson, is also a staff designee. Austan Goolsbee, a University of Chicago economist; Heather Zichal deputy director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change; Rick Wade acting chief of staff at the Commerce Department; Edward Montgomery, a senior advisor in the Department of Labor and Dan Utech, an assistant to Energy Secretary Steven Chu are also staff designees.

Automotive News said it will stop printing the twice-monthly Automotive News Europe, based in Munich, due to the economic trials hitting Europe. Automotive News said it will continue to cover the European automotive industry with an online European newsletter and Web site. The English-language European trade publication had been in published for 13 years. Crain will continue to publish the Munich-based, German-language Automobilwoche every second week.

Crystal Windham has been named General Motors' director of North American passenger-car design. Windham will head interior design for global mid-size, compact and small cars for GM North America. She is the first African-American woman to be named to design director status at GM. She was a lead designer on the 2008 Chevrolet Malibu.

The Washington Post's **Howard Kurtz** wrote this month about the death of newspapers and

the layoff of a staggering 12,000 reporters last year. "Why a once-profitable industry suddenly seems as outmoded as America's automakers is a tale that involves arrogance, mistakes, eroding trust and the rise of a digital world in which newspapers feel compelled to give away their content," he said. But if newspapers fail, the story went on, investigative reporting and citizen education will take a hit.

New-media enthusiasts say newspapers are not irreplaceable. But Josh Marshall, whose Web site, Talking Points Memo, has six reporters -- and plans to hire more -- does not minimize the loss of dailies. "If you don't have people out working as full-time reporters, there's this category of information that's not going to appear magically out of nowhere," Nicholas Lemann, dean of Columbia University's School of Journalism, told Kurtz that papers made a mistake by giving away their wares online. "In a world where all content is free, original news gathering doesn't happen. We really need to face up to the fact that this is going to be lost."

With the old business model crumbling, some analysts say newspapers must find a way to charge for online content -- perhaps through "micropayments" of the kind popularized by iTunes, which offers songs for downloading at 99 cents apiece.

March 18 Meeting ACEEE: Priming Green Car Sales

Ms. Shruti Vaidyanathan will give an overview of the findings of ACEEE's Green Book®: The Environmental Guide to Cars and Trucks for the 2009 model year. The Green Book (www.greencars.org), now in its 12th year, rates all new vehicles by environmental impact. Ms. Therese Langer will discuss green vehicle purchase incentives, such as vehicle scrappage and feebate programs, that have been suggested to accelerate the clean-up of the vehicle fleet.

Our meeting will be held in the Morrow Room of the National Press Club, 529 14th Street NW, Washington, DC 20045. The luncheon charge is \$25 per person.

Please register at our website, www.washautopress.org. See you there!

President's Message...

Welcome to 2009! With all of the doom and gloom associated with the auto industry this year it may be hard to look ahead. But we have been here before and the industry has recovered. It may look quite a bit different, but it will survive.

Fifty years ago, the 1958 recession saw a 31% downturn in auto sales from the year before, along with a 7% unemployment rate. Many companies used the recession as an impetus to streamline processes, become more efficient and look at different markets. Much the same is happening today. The good

companies will get better and unfortunately for their employees, some marginal companies will go away.

At WAPA, we want to help you do your job better by getting timely and correct information to your viewers, listeners and readers. With our proximity to the Nations Capital, we are looking at bringing you speakers on opportune topics. Our next meeting on March 18 will highlight this with speakers from the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy for our

monthly luncheon at the National Press Club.

I truly hope this is a great year for all of our members and the auto industry as a whole.

Enjoy the ride!

Rick Trawick
President



Rick Trawick
2009 WPA
President

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