

German Cars



The head of Mercedes Benz recently apologised for the poor quality of some recent cars.

Why then, have so many people been conned into thinking that by buying a German car they are getting something better? Part of the answer is brilliant public relations by the upmarket German manufacturers, who for decades have traded on people's vanity. Mercedes-Benz has always been the number one choice worldwide by dictators and business executives alike.

When you strip away buyers' rationalisations, the bottom line is that upmarket German cars offer you the illusion that you are the member of some master race of car owners. All you have to do is part with a precious few hundred thousand and then you can drive around believing that you are superior, safer and wiser than the Nissan-driving peasants you overtake on the motorway.

This strategy worked until the Japanese began producing models that were just as good, just as safe and cheaper.

There was a time when German cars were among the best engineered in the world. Not any more. But the real problem runs much deeper than that; the problem with German cars is not so much the engineering as the design: Germans are first class engineers and second-class designers.

Because there are so many good engineers in Germany, they tend to dominate the design process as well. That's not usually a good thing, because, by and large, the better an engineer is, the worse a designer they are. For an engineer there is no challenge in performing simple engineering tasks that any apprentice could do. The challenge – and the prestige – is in accomplishing ever more precise and ever more complicated tasks.

It's a general rule that to make a car reliable, you have to keep it simple. The less complicated the design, the fewer parts you have flying around, therefore the fewer things there are to go wrong. The original Volkswagen Beetles were reliable cars because they were simple cars.

In the days when Japanese cars were noisy little tin boxes, German cars like Mercedes got away with poor design because they were superbly engineered. They were like an old castle: they stayed together not because they were well designed, but because they were so massive.

Those days are long gone. The Germans are in panic mode because they, like everyone else, can see that it's just a matter of time before the Japanese take their traditional markets off them. Many German manufacturers have responded by cheapening the design and manufacturing, which has only made matters worse – not only do German cars cost more than their Asian equivalents, but they are less reliable in some cases.

If you own a new BMW in Germany, it's likely that, for the first few years at least, only factory-approved mechanics will be working on it and they will be completely familiar with all aspects of its care and repair. Social pressure combined with super-tough tax and safety laws may put that BMW off the road long before it ever gives serious trouble. The system is complicated, but it has traditionally worked for the Germans.

Compare this to America, a country originally colonised by semi-illiterate peasants from Europe. Early American cars had to be built simply enough so that any averagely-talented small town blacksmith could repair them. Simplify was the catchcry of the early-twentieth century American car industry.

This call was taken up by the Japanese after World War II. All the great Japanese cars have a simple elegance of design that embraces the principle of 'less is more', the elegant theme that runs throughout Japanese traditional culture. Designers who embrace the 'less is more' philosophy

believe that you should include only that which is necessary, and nothing more.

Twenty years ago a \$100,000 Mercedes Benz was a superbly engineered car that would often do 200,000km or more without a hitch.

Nowadays a \$30,000 Toyota Camry is a moderately well engineered, but superbly designed, car that will often do 200,000km or more without a hitch. Take the Camry slightly upmarket and you have a Lexus. Sell the Lexus to Mercedes' traditional customers and Germany has a problem.

The Germans saw this problem coming, and for the last fifteen years carmakers like BMW & Mercedes have been fighting an imaginary war with the Japanese over how many high tech gadgets they could jam in their cars, the assumption being that the customers would opt for a German car if it had more gadgets & buttons.

The problem is at some stage all those little engineering marvels break down, one by one, and the repair costs may eventually exceed the price paid for the vehicle. Some German cars are now so complicated that they give worse reliability than a Lada. The simple fact is that the average German car is no safer, and is less reliable, than the average Japanese car. Yet it may cost much more to buy and many times more to fix.

Worse, things that come for free on many Asian cars, such as air conditioning, are often expensive extras on German models.

There are two areas where the Germans are still ahead of the Japanese: interior & exterior styling.

Even new German cars are often shockingly unreliable, and once you've paid over your money, you may discover that the dealership is no longer interested in your problems.

It's even worse if you're buying second-hand; if you can't afford to buy a new German car, then (trust us) you can't afford to buy an old one, okay? •

