AutoTrader.com Survey Reveals Shopper Perceptions And Concerns Regarding Diesel, Hybrid, Electric And Plug-in Hybrid Vehicles

ATLANTA, Nov. 14, 2013 /PRNewswire/ -- A recent survey by AutoTrader.com® shows that there are still significant gaps that need to be closed in order for consumers to increase their consideration and purchase of alternative fuel vehicles. The survey, which measured consumer attitudes on a range of topics concerning diesels, hybrids, electric vehicles (EVs) and plug-in hybrids, revealed that cost was one of the top concerns across the board, and perceptions about battery life/range are working against hybrid and plug-in vehicles.

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"As automakers continue to invest in alternative fuel technologies to meet the ever-increasing fuel economy and emissions standards, it is important that they address car shoppers' concerns about these vehicles if they want to accelerate adoption," said Brian Moody, site editor at AutoTrader.com.

According to the survey, the top motivators cited as reasons shoppers would consider purchasing an alternative fuel vehicle are less emotional and more practical, with three of the top five being related to saving money—whether in fuel costs or by receiving a tax credit. "Better fuel economy" came in first at 70 percent, followed by "Cost of savings on gas" at 56 percent, "Cleaner emissions" at 37 percent, "Better for the environment" at 28 percent and "Federal Tax Credit" at 24 percent.

Regarding the general perceptions of these different types of vehicles, hybrids and diesels were on par with each other for being associated with "Good fuel economy," while hybrids and EVs were equal in their perception of having innovative technology. Diesels outshined the other vehicles in regard to reputation, practicality and value for the money. Naturally, EVs were cited more frequently for being environmentally friendly and for having cleaner emissions, with the latter being a category that diesels fell far behind in.

Even so, the price premium that accompanies vehicles with alternative fuel technology is a major factor that affects consideration, as the survey showed that a significant percentage of shoppers are unwilling to pay a premium over traditional-gasoline powered vehicles. Of those who are aware of each vehicle type, only 53 percent indicated that they are willing to pay a premium for diesels, and the numbers go down from there: 51 percent for hybrids, 41 percent for EVs and 39 percent for plug-in hybrids.

Cost and perception are obstacles for diesels

While the good news for diesels is that nearly three fourths of those who are aware of the technology recognize that diesels are more fuel efficient than traditional gasoline vehicles, cost and perception of diesels are affecting consideration. The top three reasons why consumers would not purchase a diesel were all related to cost: "Fuel expense" was cited by 55 percent, "Too expensive to purchase" was cited by 46 percent and "Potentially high cost of maintenance" was cited by 45 percent. But the next two reasons should concern automakers the most: "Noise" was cited by 32 percent and "Not really better for the environment" was cited by 29 percent.

"Diesels have come a long way since they were first introduced in the U.S., but that perception of the clunky car with black soot coming out the tailpipe persists," said Moody. "Automakers who are investing in clean diesel technology need to ensure that they are clearly explaining and promoting how diesel technology has changed."

Cost and battery concerns are obstacles for hybrids and plug-ins

Similar to diesels, cost was among the top factors leading consumers to decide against hybrid and plug-in vehicles, but the degree to which those were concerns was higher for these vehicles. "Too expensive to purchase" was the top reason to decide against both hybrid and plug-in hybrids, at 66 and 71 percent, respectively. For EVs, the price tag came in third, but still at a notable 60 percent. Maintenance was also a top concern affecting the decision, with "Potentially high cost of maintenance" being cited by 55 percent in the hybrid category and 58 percent in both the EV and plug-in hybrid categories.

Going beyond cost, concerns about the battery ranked high as well in the reasons consumers would decide against these vehicles, with "Battery life/range" being cited by 52 percent for hybrids, 67 percent for EVs and 64 percent for plug-in hybrids. This concern about range was further exemplified by respondents citing "Concerned about charging stations" as the No. 2 reason to decide against an EV (cited by 66 percent).

On a follow up question regarding EVs and plug-ins, 59 percent of respondents indicated that EVs would need to get over 150 miles per charge for them to consider the vehicle, and 56 percent said that plug-in hybrids would need to get over 80 miles on a single charge for them to consider the vehicle. Even so, the mere act of plugging in a vehicle was disconcerting for some, with 31 percent citing "Don't want to plug in" as a reason to decide against and EV and 40 percent citing the same for plug-in hybrids.

"The fact that automakers have begun to reduce the prices of vehicles with electric powertrain technology is proof that they recognize that cost is a major factor affecting consideration and purchase of those vehicles," Moody continued. "However, if they want to increase sales, they will need to keep making improvements in range, as well as charging infrastructure and technology to lessen the anxiety and perceived burdens these alternative technologies introduce into the ownership experience."

Toyota leads with alternative vehicles

Of all the automakers who offer alternative fuel vehicles, seven have high awareness among shoppers: Toyota, Honda, Ford, Lexus, Chevrolet, Nissan and Volkswagen. When asked to identify which automakers they would identify as leading in the space, Toyota came out on top with 48 percent, Honda came in second with 28 percent and Ford rounded out the top three with 25 percent.

About the Survey

AutoTrader.com conducted survey interviews among site visitors July 10 – August 27, 2013. Participants were recruited via an invitation and must have been aware of alternative fuel vehicles to qualify for the study. A statistically valid total of 316 completed surveys were collected and analyzed to produce the insights included in this release.

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For further information: Julie Shipp, 404-568-7914 (o) 404-558-7837 (m), julie.shipp@autotrader.com

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