

Lincoln MKZ its mark

by Mark_Maynard

I was evaluating a Lincoln MKZ when J.D. Power and Associates released its 2007 Initial Quality Study. In it 14 Ford Motor Co. models placed in the top three of their segments, which a survey spokesman called "an achievement unmatched by any other corporation this year" and a testament to the improvement in quality for Ford Motor Co. vehicles and plants.

LINCOLN MKZ - The Lincoln MKZ sedan, previously called the Zephyr, debuted this year with a more powerful V-6 engine, new grille treatment and the option of all-wheel drive. CNS Photo courtesy of Lincoln. Lincoln received awards for the Mark LT pickup and MKZ sedan, which competes with 15 models in the "compact premium" segment. Mercury won for the Milan sedan, a cousin to the MKZ and Ford Fusion.

Also notable was that Lincoln's ranking for initial quality took a huge step forward from 12th place in 2006 to third this year, behind Lexus and Porsche at No. 1.

It is a formidable survey, based on responses from more than 97,000 purchasers and lessees of new 2007 model-year cars and trucks surveyed after 90 days of ownership.

The survey rated the MKZ a 4.5 out of five for mechanical quality and four out of five for design. The scores look at owner-reported problems that have caused a complete breakdown or malfunction of any component, feature, or item, such as components that stop working or trim pieces that break or come loose.

This type of scoring is beneficial when shopping for a new car and winnowing the candidates among 15 models. Think of it as asking thousands of owners, "How do you like your car?"

This model debuted in 2005 as the Zephyr, a fabulous name recalling glorious Lincolns from generations ago. Last year it was renamed MKZ, which somewhat recalls the Mark series of Lincolns and Z for Zephyr. I

find these letter-names confusing, particularly when also talking about the Lincoln MKX crossover in the same sentence or, perhaps, the MKR concept sedan. But that's a rant I don't have space for here.

MKZ has a starting price of \$30,045, including a \$740 freight charge. All-wheel-drive adds \$1,870. The test car with options was \$35,790.

New this year is a larger and more powerful V-6 engine with the six-speed automatic transmission from last year. The 263-horsepower, 3.5-liter V-6 is a boost of 42 hp from last year's 3.0 V-6. The new engine runs on 87 octane, a big plus when adding up ownership costs.

And while performance is up, fuel economy is down by 1 mpg - 18 mpg around town to 26 highway with all-wheel drive and 19/27 for front-drive.

Ford says this V-6 "was designed to be compatible with direct injection and turbocharged direct injection technology" for more power, but not likely from eight cylinders.

"I like the idea of a hot-rod Lincoln, but you don't need a V-8 to get there," says spokesman Alan Hall.

The MKZ also debuts the new Lincoln grille. It's a face full of chrome, but it works on this car - and the other Lincolns - to identify the brand.

All-wheel-drive is another new option this year. The automatic system can adjust traction fore and aft and side to side as needed. Any influence was imperceptible in my experience and possibly sharpened that car's attitude when driven energetically.

The six-speed automatic is a fine shifter, but I found myself reaching for the manual mode. There isn't one. This car has responsive handling and adequate horsepower to enjoy a good romp, which would be enhanced by a flick of the gearshift.

Ford is investigating adding a "manumatic" shift feature to the transmission, Hall says, but adds that it is of greater interest to journalists than the target customers.

MKZ has the driving and comfort conveniences expected of a luxury car without being an electronically complex, rolling media interface. The car is quite simple to use and enjoy. However, a voice-activated in-car communications and entertainment system are planned for 2008. (Give it a try at www.syncmyride.com.)

Will this Microsoft-partnered system be easy to use? Perhaps. Ford's navigation system is among the easiest to program I've used, but it is pricey at \$2,495.

Sightlines are good for the driver, entry and exit are comfortable and there are no serious ergonomic issues. The \$495 option for the uplevel steering wheel with redundant controls for audio and fan is worthwhile. The center stack of controls uses flat buttons that are low and adjustments take time to become intuitive without removing eyes from the road. Having those controls on the wheel is convenient and safer.

The rear seat back has a 60/40 fold - unusual in a sedan - that expands one of the largest trunks in the segment, 15.8 cubic feet. The back seat area is roomy, but footroom is tight.

Safety features include six air bags and traction control, but no electronic stability control. But all Ford products will have ESP by the end of 2009, Hall said.

The recent and numerous consumer awards for Lincoln and Ford Motor Co. have come from seeds sown years ago.

"It was gratifying to go over the J.D. Power results," said Ford spokesman Jim Cain. "You make investments in quality over time and it can be a little like the Bay of Fundy. You don't get immediate satisfaction until the tide comes in, but when it does come in you get it in a big way."

One thing the Power survey called out was how significant it was to launch an all-new range of vehicles with such a high degree of quality, Cain said.

"In their analysis, we are also achieving high quality with the launch of the Ford Edge and Lincoln MKX," he said.

"You start to get the very strong sense that the wheel is turning." SPECS

2007 Lincoln MKZ all-wheel drive

Body style: compact, five-passenger sedan

Engine: aluminum, 263 horsepower, 3.5-liter V-6

Transmission: six-speed transmission

EPA fuel economy estimates: 18 mpg city, 26 highway; 87 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Cargo space: 15.8 cubic feet

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 38.7/42.3/56.9 inches

Length/wheelbase: 190.5/107.4 inches

Curb weight: 3,410 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, dual-zone climate control, twin chrome exhaust tips, quad halogen headlamps, heated power mirrors with approach lighting, 10-way (heated) power front seats with driver memory presets, floor mats, fog lamps, six-speaker six-disc CD audio system, tilt-telescopic steering wheel

Safety equipment includes: Front, side and curtain air bags; four-wheel disc brakes with ABS, and electronic brake force distribution

PRICING

Base: \$32,410, including \$740 freight charge; price as tested, \$35,790

Options on test car: leather steering wheel (with cruise, audio and fan controls) and heated and cooled front seats, \$495; high-intensity discharge headlights, \$495; Sirius satellite radio and six-month subscription, \$195; interior satin-aluminum trim, \$195; navigation system, \$2,495;

Warranty: four-years/50,000-miles bumper-to-bumper with free scheduled maintenance for 12-months/12,000-miles; five-years/70,000-miles powertrain with roadside assistance

The competition: Audi A4, Acura TL, BMW 3-Series, Cadillac CTS, Infiniti G35, Lexus IS, Mercedes C-Class, etc.

Where assembled: Hermosillo, Mexico

PLUSES: Styling, value, accommodating interior and horsepower that requires only 87 octane.

MINUSES: Wide turning circle, no electronic stability control, expensive (but easy to use) navigation system.

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