Customers rave about Model 3 in new Bloomberg survey



Enlarge / A truck full of Model 3 cars.

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An impressive 99.6% of Tesla Model 3 customers describe the vehicle as a pleasure to drive, Bloomberg reports in a new survey. The first three installments of Bloomberg's four-part survey have been published in recent days.

Bloomberg talked to almost 5,000 customers about their experiences owning the Model 3. Many customers reported having specific problems with their cars—minor manufacturing defects, long wait times for repairs, mistakes by Tesla's Autopilot

software.

Some of these problems related to the ramp-up of Model 3 production over the last two years. In 2018, Tesla struggled to manufacture the Model 3 in volume and without defects. More recently, the company has struggling to provide timely service as the number of Tesla cars on the road swelled.

Yet these experiences don’t seem to have made a big impression on customers, who overwhelmingly gave the automaker high marks.

Most customers believe Autopilot makes them safer

More than 90% of survey respondents told Bloomberg they believed that Tesla’s Autopilot technology has made them safer. This is despite the fact that some of those same drivers said the driver-assistance system had put them in a dangerous situation.

“Autopilot saw an emergency braking event two cars ahead of me,” a Tesla owner in Texas told Bloomberg. Autopilot’s radar is able to see “through” cars, allowing it to apply the brakes before a human driver would have been able to.

Sometimes Autopilot gets overzealous, however. “The forward collision-avoidance function is very twitchy with a lot of false alarms,” a Virginia owner told Bloomberg. One such false alarm almost caused a crash from the car behind.

Autopilot also makes more serious errors. “Navigate on Autopilot tried to steer the car into a concrete wall along an exit ramp,” an owner from California wrote. “This keeps happening at the same spot multiple times.” In 2018, another California Tesla owner, Walter Huang, died under similar circumstances. Federal investigators concluded that Autopilot steered his vehicle into a concrete lane divider.

But many owners also said Autopilot had prevented crashes. “A deer jumped in front of me on a dark road at night. By the time my foot moved to the brake pedal, it was already pressed to the floor,” a Colorado customer told Bloomberg.

Overall, 28% of drivers said Autopilot had saved them from a dangerous situation, more than double the 13% who said that Autopilot had put them in a dangerous situation.

Tesla owners were less positive about Smart Summon, Tesla’s recently released technology for driverless operation in parking lots. Seventy percent of Tesla owners said it was useful, while just 41% described it as safe enough for the average driver.

Improved manufacturing leads to growing pains at service centers

Bloomberg’s data shows that Tesla has dramatically improved the quality of its vehicle manufacturing over the course of 2019. Tesla’s manufacturing problems peaked in February 2019, with slightly more than 100 defects for every 100 Model 3 vehicles sold. By September, the rate was down to 35 defects for every 100 sales.

While Tesla seems to have hit its stride with manufacturing the Model 3 at scale, soaring sales have strained Tesla’s network of repair centers. More than 20% of customers said they were dissatisfied with the timeliness of Tesla’s repairs, and a similar number were unsatisfied with repair adequacy.

Elon Musk made improving the Tesla repair process a top priority in 2019, and the company has made progress on some dimensions. The company moved parts from regional warehouses into repair centers, which meant less time spent waiting for necessary parts. But a third of customers in the third quarter of 2019 reported having to wait for 10 days or longer for an

appointment at a Tesla service center.

Bloomberg’s data shows that it took about a month, on average, for a car to be repaired after a crash. That’s an improvement over early 2018, when it took more than two months for the average customer to have a working car after a crash.

This is significant because it’s harder to find an independent mechanic qualified to service Tesla’s electric vehicles than a conventional gasoline-powered car.

One final bit of interesting data from the Bloomberg survey: the Model 3’s battery seems to maintain its capacity better than those of earlier models. All batteries suffer from declining capacity after many charge cycles. But Bloomberg’s data shows that the average Model 3 loses only 2.5% of its rated capacity after 40,000 miles on the road. A typical Model S sold in 2014 lost more than 4% of its charge after driving the same distance.

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