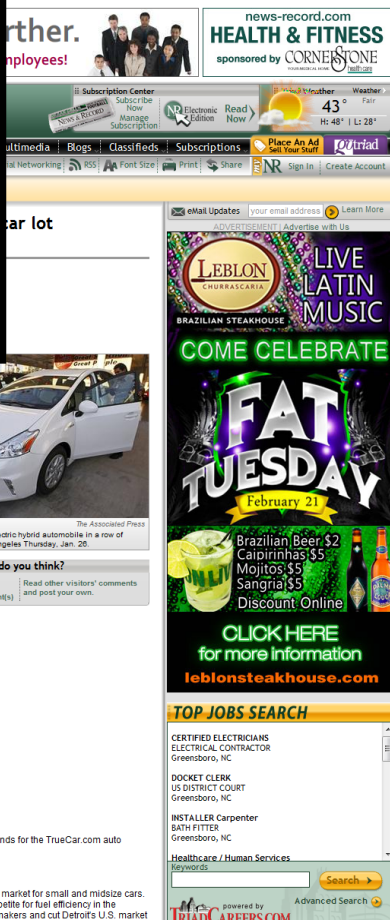


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likely to end up with a lemon.

In the past five years, global competition has forced automakers to improve the quality and reliability of their vehicles — everything from inexpensive mini-cars to decked-out luxury SUVs.

The newfound emphasis on quality means fewer problems for owners. It also means more options for buyers, who can buy a car from Detroit or South Korea and know it will hold up like a vehicle from Japan.

With few exceptions, cars are so close on reliability that it's getting harder for companies to charge a premium. So automakers are trying to set themselves apart with sleek, cutting-edge exterior designs and more features such as luxurious interiors, multiple air bags, dashboard computers and touch-screen controls.



The Associated Press  
An employee parks a Toyota gas-electric hybrid automobile in a row of similar cars at a dealership in Los Angeles Thursday, Jan. 26.

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"It's a great time to be a consumer," says Jesse Toprak, vice president of industry trends for the TrueCar.com auto pricing website. "You can't really screw up too badly in terms of your vehicle choice."

It wasn't always this close.

In the 1990s, Honda and Toyota dominated in quality, especially in the key American market for small and midsize cars. Japan began building high-quality small cars and tapped into America's growing appetite for fuel efficiency in the 1970s. With their sterling reputation, they were able to charge more than Detroit automakers and cut Detroit's U.S. market

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