

Shifting Gears

[The Toyota Camry: Still the one to Beat](#)

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By Roger Witherspoon

The Toyota executive was beaming.

He stood in the cavernous entrance hall at the New York Mets' Citifield last August, in front of a glistening, redesigned, stylish Camry, the flagship of the company's fleet and the nation's best-selling mid-sized sedan. It had been a rough two years for Toyota and its personnel: lurid stories of runaway cars and stuck accelerators had eroded confidence in the company's quality controls and the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami had caused thousands of deaths and seriously eroded the company's manufacturing pipeline. Both events contributed to Toyota losing its hard fought status as the world's biggest car company to a resurgent General Motors.

But the unveiling of the 2012 Camry was supposed to change that, to herald the start of a new, resurgent time for the Japanese car maker. With a flourish, the cover was whisked off the prototype model to appreciative nods

from the automotive press.

And then, the Earth moved. Literally. And the walls shook. And the floor moved. And a panicky voice on the loudspeaker shouted: “This is an earthquake. Evacuate the building immediately!”

Toyota’s pre-launch media hoopla may have been lost in the aftermath of the major east coast earthquake which caused minor damage to buildings and major worries about the safety of American nuclear power plants. It was not the most auspicious introduction to the car that Toyota hoped would restore its luster as the one to beat in a field with strong competition from a resurgent Detroit and an upstart Korea. But as the car made its way to showrooms this year, it has proved to be as special as the company hoped it would.



“Toyota has done extraordinarily well,” said Alec Gutierrez, manager of vehicle valuation for Kelly Blue Book. “For the first seven months of this year compact car sales were flat compared to last year with an increase of just 1.4%. But mid-sized cars accounted for 18.6% market share in June, a 44% increase year over year. The surge in mid-sized car sales can largely be attributed to the strength of the redesigned Toyota Camry, which posted more than 32,000 sales in June alone.

“The mid-sized segment traditionally has been dominated by Camry and the Honda Accord. When they are redesigned there are so many people out there who will only buy from Toyota or Honda. The Camry until now was conservative in terms of styling. For 2012, they didn’t stray too far in terms

of design, but it was upgraded in terms of fuel economy and is competitive with compact cars. They didn't increase the price much and there is the Toyota brand loyalty. Anyone considering a mid-sized car is going to consider Camry. It's the long standing reputation they built in terms of Camry's reliability and long term desirability that keeps it in the top position."

According to a national survey by KBB, the 10 best-selling mid-sized cars from January through July of this year are:

Camry – Sales 243,800. Up 40% over 2011

Honda accord – 183,800. Up 18%

Nissan Altima, 183,700. Up 20%

Ford Fusion – 160,200. Up 6%

Chevy Malibu – 153,800. Up 8%

Hondai Sonata – 138,400. Up 2%

Kia Optima – 86,500. Up 99%

Chrysler 200 – 78,400. Up 105%

VW Passat – 64,100. Was not available

Subaru Outback – 63,300. Up 6%

Gutierrez added that "Toyota has played a large role in the nation's auto market in general, and account for 18.5% of all car sales this year, compared to only 16% last year." The company is still in third place, however, behind

General Motors and Ford, who's revamped Fusion may threaten Nissan and Honda for the Number 2 spot on the mid-sized list.

But for the foreseeable future, the Toyota Camry is still the one to beat.



To start understanding the allure of the 2012 Camry, take a look at the outside styling. It is still a family sedan, but now has an aggressive-looking, low-scooped, front grill similar to that of its sporty, costlier Lexus IS 350. It is a distinct departure from the sedate, conservative appearance of previous generations of Camry, with a face that is more grimace than smile.

At a glance of its side profile, the Camry's styling is not as eye-popping as that of the drawn-in-America Hyundai Sonata. But Toyota has definitely dropped the laid-back look and opted for a more flowing, artistic design which draws the eye approvingly from that charging face, over the wide wheel rims to a flare at the rear. It is not a car that is sitting on its laurels.

Under the hood, the Camry has a 3.5-liter, V-6 engine producing 268 horsepower and 248 pound-feet of torque, which is more than enough to let the Camry run with the best of the highway pack. The engine drinks regular unleaded gasoline, but is thirstier than one might expect from a Toyota. The Camry's EPA rating is just 21 miles per gallon in city driving and 30 MPG on the highway. And if you opt for the less expensive, 178-horsepower, four-cylinder engine the Camry has an EPA rating of 25 miles per gallon in city driving and 35 MPG on the highway – which is about what you would get from a compact car like the Honda Civic.

If one is really looking to cut down on trips to the gas station, Camry has a

hybrid edition carrying an EPA rating of 40 miles per gallon in the stop and go city traffic, and 38 MPG on the highway. The Camry hybrid has a 2.5-liter gasoline engine producing just 156 horsepower and 156 pound-feet of torque. But it is mated to a 105 kilowatt electric engine that gives the Hybrid power plant a combined rating of 200 horsepower. The electric motor's 199 pound-feet of torque added to that of the gas engine makes the Hybrid significantly more responsive and quick – in taking off or passing – than the standard Camry with the big gas engine.

There are, of course, tradeoffs when one buys a hybrid. The combined power plant adds about \$2,000 or more to the price of the car, which can be partially offset by cutting back on the options. In addition, the hybrid's regenerative braking system uses the heat generated by the brake pads to make more electricity. As a result, Toyota Hybrid owners avoid having a large brake repair job five or six years down the road. So it may be more productive to consider a full hybrid system such as this one as a performance enhancement with a higher upfront cost but reduced carrying costs and less stress on the average budget.



Aside from the gas mileage the differences between the standard and the hybrid models are slight. The rear seats in the standard Camry can fold down, thus enlarging an already ample storage area. In the hybrid version, that middle area between the rear seat and the trunk, however, is occupied by the battery, so the trunk is a bit smaller and the seats do not fold down.

Inside, the Camry offers the type of real wood trim on the doors, center console and dash that is usually reserved for more upscale, full sized sedans. The seats are leather, power adjusted and can be heated in the regular Camry. And though one may opt for cloth covered seats in the hybrid for

economic reasons, these, too, can be heated, which is a boon in cold weather climates or if you're just plain tired.

For entertainment, the Camrys are now part of the Toyota/Lexus Entune system, which lets you set up your musical tastes and folders on your computer at home and these are instantly available in the vehicle. They come with AM/FM and Sirius satellite HD radio for standard enjoyment over 10 JBL speakers. In addition, there is Bluetooth connectivity both for phone use and playing music. The system also has connections for iPods, MP3 players and USB drives. There is also a CD changer.



The system can be controlled via fingertip controls on the leather steering wheel or through the seven-inch, color, touch screen, which also provides navigation and a crystal clear backup camera.

The fully loaded Camry will tap your wallet for \$32,500, which is packing an awful lot into a well-designed package. It is not surprising that the Camry still sets the standard for all the rest.