

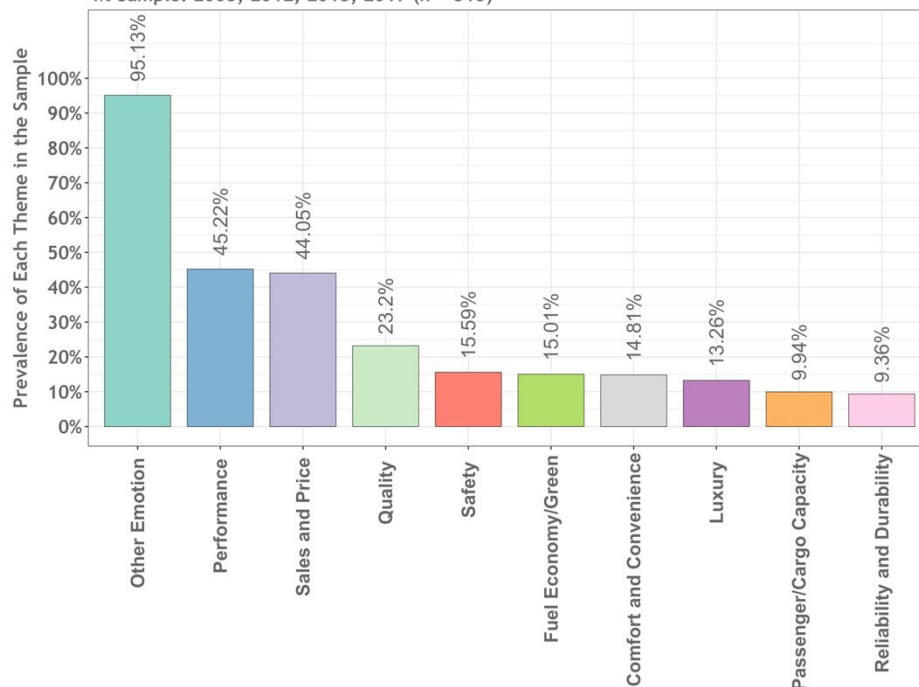
What are Automakers Trying to Sell?

Fuel Economy and Safety Take a Back Seat

The U.S. auto industry invests heavily in advertising, spending nearly \$14 billion per year between 2008 and 2014. Two automakers — Ford and General Motors — were among the top 10 advertisers in the United States in 2016, and the automotive industry was second only to retail in [spending on digital advertising in 2018](#). A new study examines the messages automakers are sending consumers through those dollars.

Most Prevalent Themes in Advertising¹

Figure E.1. Theme Frequency
4% Sample: 2005, 2012, 2015, 2017 (n = 513)



Key Findings of New Analysis of Auto Advertising:

- Emotional appeals appear in almost all auto ads (**97%**).
- Performance-related attributes (**45%**) were mentioned **3x** more often than either safety (**16%**) or fuel economy/green² (**15%**) attributes.
- "Sales" (bonus cash, low APR, sale events) were close behind performance at **44%**.
- Advertisements for plug-in/electric vehicles varied between **0%** and **1.4%** across the study years.

¹The "Other Emotion" category covers emotional appeals not tied to the other 9 categories in Figure E.1, but, some of these other categories also include specific emotional appeals, so overall, 97% of ads included emotional appeals.

²Note that the fuel economy/green theme contains references to eco-friendliness and greenness that are not necessarily tied to specific, physical features of a vehicle that deliver fuel economy. If the data were restricted to only such features, this theme would be less prevalent.

Advertising Trends for Fuel Economy and Safety

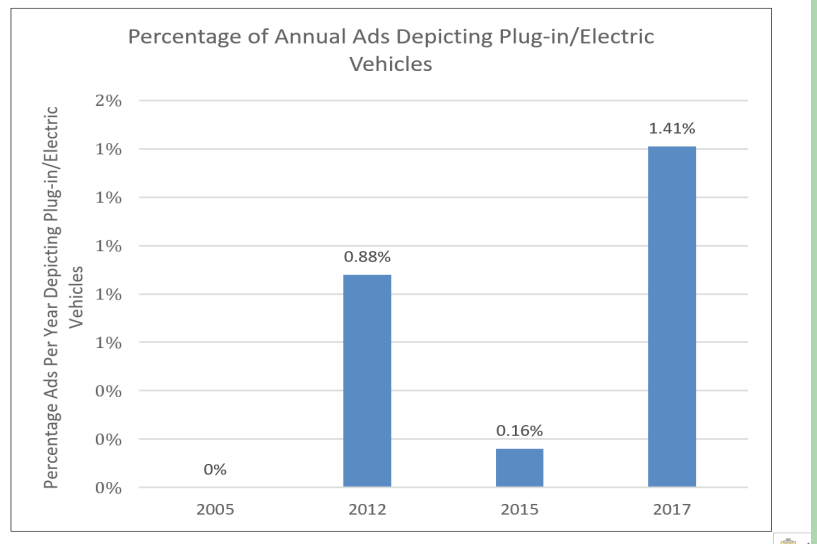
Fuel economy/green

- In 2017, fuel economy/green was only featured in **7%** of ads and ranked last of the 10 themes.
- The fuel economy/green theme is most prevalent (**30%** of ads) in 2012, the year in the sample characterized by poor economic conditions and high gas prices.

Safety

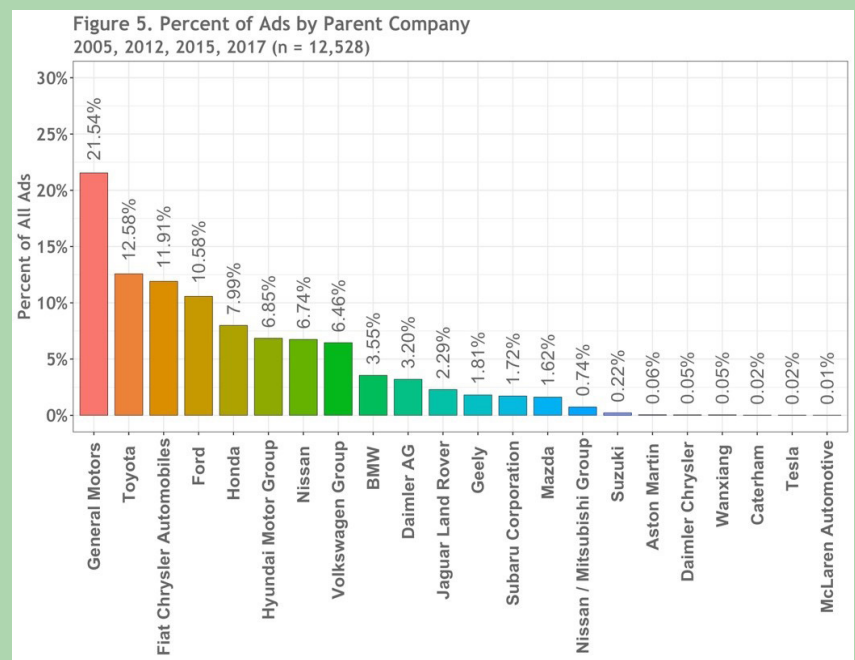
- Among parent companies, the most likely to feature safety in ads were **Volkswagen** (26%), **Toyota** (26%), and **Hyundai** (25%), while the least likely to feature safety in ads were **Nissan** (3%) and **Fiat-Chrysler** (1%).
- Minivans and SUVs are the vehicle type most likely to be promoted with a safety-themed ad, while pickup and sports car ads appear least likely.
- Safety falls **roughly in the middle** of 10 ad content themes ordered by prevalence.
- Nearly **16%** of the ads in the sample contain safety.

Electric Vehicle Advertising



Advertisements for electric vehicles make up a tiny fraction of overall auto ads.

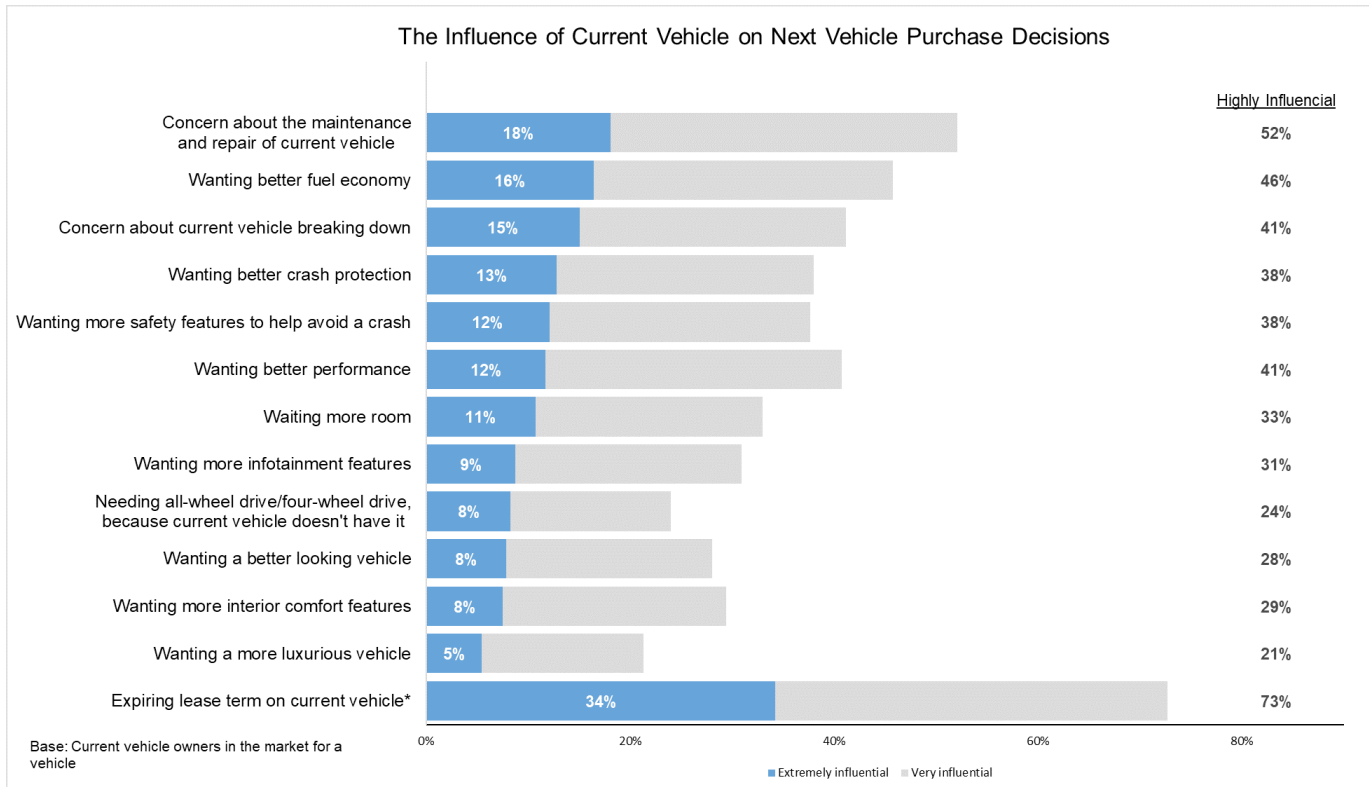
Unique Ads by Parent Company



General Motors produced the most unique ads (**22%** of all ads in the dataset), followed after a nearly ten-point drop by Toyota (**13%**), Fiat Chrysler (**12%**), and Ford (**11%**).

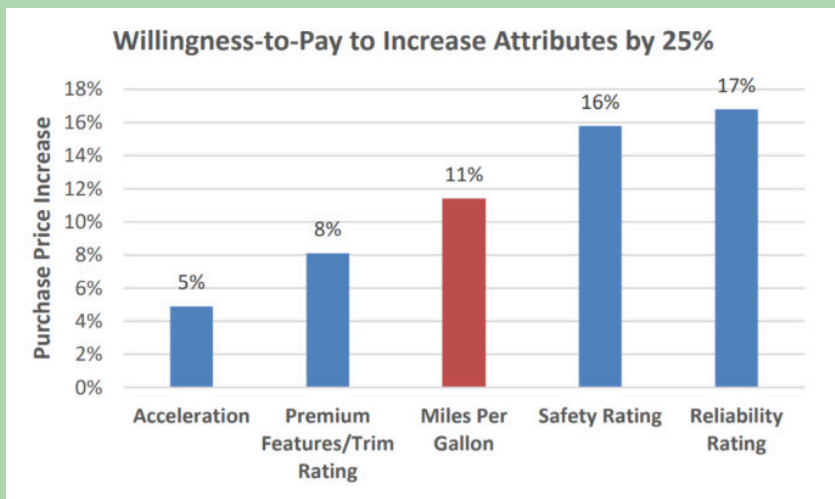
There is a Gap between Market Options and Automaker Advertising vs. What Consumers Actually Value

Reliability, fuel economy and safety are the most important influencing factors in whether consumers will buy a replacement vehicle.



- Auto buyers are willing to pay 2-3 times more for improvements to fuel economy and safety than they are for acceleration.

- Fuel economy is the number one attribute vehicle owners would like to see improved in their next vehicle, beating out performance features such as horsepower and off-road capability by a factor of four.



- And yet, fuel economy **choices are limited in the market**, with 2/3rds of car models getting within 5 mpg of the model average and nearly 2/3rds (63%) of truck models getting within 3 mpg of the model average.

Bottom Line: Fuel Economy Information Matters, But Nearly MIA in Automaker Ads

Automaker Advertising Choices Affect the Efficiency of Vehicles Sold

- Nearly one-third (30%) of vehicle owners reported they **hadn't obtained any information about their current vehicle's MPG** before purchasing or leasing.
- Only 15% of auto buyers reported learning fuel economy information from **advertising**.
- The window sticker was the **only source of MPG information** for 23% of all current vehicle owners.

Improving the fuel economy of larger and less efficient vehicles is a **consumer priority**, but the market is **not meeting that need**.

- Drivers of cars averaging less than 20 MPG were almost three times more likely than drivers of cars averaging 30 MPG or more to select fuel economy as an attribute **most in need of improvement**.
- Auto buyers were willing to pay 40% more to boost fuel economy from 20 mpg than for the same mpg increase from 25 or 30 mpg.

When Consumers Have Information on Fuel Economy, They Select More Efficient Vehicles

- Auto buyers who saw fuel economy information when selecting their preferred vehicle chose more efficient vehicles in a realistic choice experiment.
- In the same experiment, auto buyers who saw fuel economy information ranked fuel economy higher in importance relative to other attributes.
- Auto buyers' valuation of fuel economy can vary depending on the information provided.

Methodology: Conducted by Dr. Gwen Arnold of University of California, Davis, the auto ad analysis relied on a random sample of advertisements for light-duty vehicles released via television, print, or online in the United States in 2005, 2012, 2015, and 2017. A team of researchers reviewed stratified random samples of 513 and 627 ads derived from a larger population of ads (12,528) provided by a media monitoring company. The ten most common categories were performance, sales, quality, safety, fuel economy/green, comfort/convenience, luxury, passenger/cargo capacity and reliability/durability. In addition to identifying the prevalence of these ten themes, the analysis identified whether an ad's message was an emotional appeal or a physical description of the vehicle itself.