



New or older cars best overall for the environment?

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Buy new or carry on with the devil you know? Kim Henson provides some food for thought on this...

(Note from Kim: The two photographs in our heading sequence are depicting current and older -1996 - Vauxhall Astras, just as examples).

There is much debate currently taking place regarding vehicle emissions, the clean air/pollution issue and the environment in general. There is also much misinformation out there - some of it deliberate - and it can be difficult to sort the honest wood from the smokescreen trees (pardon the pun).

Inevitably, you would think, that as time passes and vehicle technologies improve, so would emissions levels - and of course this is the basis on which car manufacturers are offering 'scrappage' schemes to encourage motorists to ditch their old faithfuls and buy new vehicles. Equally, the cynical might say that this is very definitely more about selling new cars than perceived environmental benefits...

At the outset I should stress that I too am all for cleaning up the air and avoiding awful, serious health problems for people (and animals, come to that). My own son lives in London and tells of some days when, due to pollution, it is almost impossible for him to breathe freely when walking in the city.

So what should one do? Buy the latest model or carry on with an older vehicle? Of course, too, it needs to be recognised that not everyone can afford to change, even with the carrot



of a few thousand pounds off the list price of a new motor.

Well it is very difficult to find out all the relevant facts, especially in terms of the emissions produced by a specific vehicle. Sure, the MoT test gives a very crude approximation, but this is far from the whole story of course.

This thought-provoking article, from the BBC, gives a fascinating insight into some of the aspects, and provides a more balanced view than is usually found when such subjects are discussed: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/how_toxic_is_your_car_exhaust

A few thoughts from me that you may find interesting/thought-provoking...

1. If you wish to buy a new or nearly new car, that's great and good luck to you; (I'm certainly not saying don't buy a new vehicle - one day I too may - or may not - decide to take the plunge again).
2. If you decide to keep your old faithful on the road, for whatever reason, don't be made to feel guilty and/or be encouraged to scrap it purely on what you are told are environmental grounds. It may well be that your older model is less damaging *overall* to the environment than some more modern vehicles. Consider all angles, don't just believe all the headlines you read/hear.
3. It is a fact that producing a new vehicle uses up valuable 'earth' resources, in terms of materials and energy required. Conversely if you run a vehicle that has already been built, these resources can 'stay where they are' (for a while at least).
4. Particulate emissions from diesel engines (especially older types) is, of course, a concern, especially in built-up/congested areas. Conversely, fuel consumption from a diesel motor is still typically and significantly better (perhaps by 30 per cent or more) than for a petrol engine providing similar performance, so less fuel is required. This means that for someone covering high mileages, a diesel car will be cheaper to run, AND less oil from the ground is needed to operate it. (In addition, it is worth mentioning that much work has been carried out to retro-fit older diesels with particulate filters to help clean up exhaust emissions, although - surprisingly - such products are not currently widely available).



5. Depending which report you believe, the percentage of nitrogen dioxide ('NoX') pollutants found in British cities and produced by private cars varies between 4% and 11% - meaning that the other 89% to 96% is accounted for by lorries, buses and heating systems in buildings. Surely there are some inefficiencies here that need to be addressed?
6. Regardless of the age and type of vehicle you drive, regular/frequent maintenance is essential for optimising performance and emissions. Bear in mind that in all engines the condition of the oil is paramount in helping prevent wear and mechanical deterioration of the engine (that in turn can result in higher than usual emissions). In addition, in many modern engines, clean oil is ESSENTIAL for efficiently operating the valve gear (especially in motors incorporating variable valve timing systems). All the specialists and garage owners I have spoken to advise that it is preferable to change the engine oil and filter at least every 6,000 miles or annually (whichever comes first), rather than adhering to the less frequent intervals often advocated by the car manufacturer. It is also worth mentioning that repair costs, when they arise, on modern engines can be substantially higher than on older power units, due to the increasing mechanical complexities and the time involved to fix them (hence higher labour costs).
7. To help minimise emissions from any engine, it is also worth considering using the higher performance fuels available at most garage forecourts. In most cases these are cleaner-burning and said to help improve the operating efficiency of the motor, so that fuel consumption is reduced (although in my experience not enough to cover the higher cost per litre). The results are difficult to quantify, but I do keep accurate fuel consumption records and in my own diesel-powered vehicle the use of the cleaner fuels has improved mpg by between 2% and 3%, in addition to which the engine runs noticeably more smoothly.
8. If you fancy switching to an all-electric vehicle or hybrid, that's fine and these vehicles drive very well. They can also help to reduce pollution levels in town and city centres. However it is also worth considering that ultimately the electricity has to come from somewhere...

VERDICT

There is far more to this subject than meets the eye, but in the general debate it would be great to see a few more facts and a bit less hearsay... Ultimately, when deciding on whether or not to change your car, you pay your money (or not!) and take your choice!



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