



*Road & Track
Owner Survey:*

DODGE OMNI/ PLYMOUTH HORIZON

*"A small car built and designed by Americans,
for Americans, for the American way of life."*

ILLUSTRATION BY BILL DOBSON

WE THINK THE American market place is ready for our car. We have learned a lot from the experience of our competitors and we think we now have the right car and the right people packaging, the right engineering and the right design for this segment of the market place. We think we have a car whose time has come in America. We think the attitude of the buyer is right and the American consumer is ready for a unique American subcompact . . . we prefer to call it an efficiency-size small car. As promised, it is not a shrunken version of an American car but a different vehicle that fits our life-style, a car four people can travel in comfortably and a motor vehicle that handles well on the highway or in the city. A small car built and designed by Americans, for Americans, for the American way of life."

90 ROAD & TRACK

Those are the words of Robert B. McCurry, then Chrysler's Group Vice President of U.S. Automotive Sales, at the introduction of the Plymouth Horizon/Dodge Omni for 1978 (R&T, January 1978). In that report we pointed out that the Omni/ Horizon twins (O-H for convenience) were unique in the U.S. carmaking spectrum: front-wheel drive, MacPherson-strut front suspension (called Iso-strut by Chrysler), independent rear suspension, rack-and-pinion steering and a single-overhead-camshaft 4-cylinder engine--not the usual list of features for American cars. The report concluded with praise for the manufacturer: "Full credit to Chrysler for introducing what has to be considered one of the most significant new Detroit designs of this or any other year."

In the March 1978 issue of R&T, we published the results of

our complete road test of the Plymouth Horizon version and described it as "one of the most sensible cars to come out of Detroit. It's people, package and fuel efficient and adheres to thoroughly modern design practices." And in our September 1979 comparison test of "Nine Front-Wheel-Drive Sedans," the Horizon tied for 3rd place (with the Fiat Strada), only two points behind the Plymouth Champ and three back of the "winning" VW Rabbit. It was interesting to note, however, that none of the staffers doing the judging voted the Horizon as a personal favorite, despite its impressive accumulation of points in the comparative evaluation.

In the intervening time period since the introduction of the O-H, Chrysler has experienced rather drastic turmoil, including the well publicized federal government loan guarantees to avoid bankruptcy. Former Ford Motor Co President Lee Iacocca has taken over the chairmanship of Chrysler and has been valiantly directing a multi-faceted campaign to prevent the corporation's demise. There has been lots of talk about the quality of American-made cars versus Japanese and European cars; lots of questions posed regarding why the public buys imports; and potential moves in the direction of restricting imports of cars from Japan in particular. It seems quite apropos to examine the O-H in light of all the foregoing, and present the experiences of 250 owners who completed our questionnaire. Of the 250 total, 96 are 1978 models, 129 are 1979, and 25 are 1980 cars—in compiling the results, we also broke the cars down by Plymouth and Dodge categories but discovered that this had no particular significance. As is our habit, all of the cars included in the tabulation were purchased new, and 72% belong to multi-car owners; it seems from this that many owners bought O-Hs for a second car, a commuter car or for another family member who would be the primary operator. This is confirmed by the fact that 96% of the owners use their O-H for daily transportation, but only 64% take long trips in them.

Extra-cost options that are popular with our O-H owners include air conditioning (54%), an AM/FM radio of one sort or another (50% plus another 6% who added a tape player), power-assist for the steering (40%), automatic transmission (32%) and a variety of other extras such as interior and exterior trim packages, heavy-duty suspension, sunroof and special wheels that, added together, totaled 68%. While most O-H owners have other cars, they spend considerable time racking up miles in these cars: Only 25% were in the lowest, 10,000-20,000 range, and nearly one of every five owners reported more than 40,000 miles on the odometer.

Who Bought Them & Why

FUEL EFFICIENCY is one of the O-H traits that influenced the various owners' decisions to purchase the car (to the tune of 87% of the 250 people involved), followed by interior space efficiency (70%), price (66%), economy of operation (64%), fun to drive (48%), styling (43%) and handling (42%). It's interesting that 38% noted comfort as a feature that influenced their choice of the O-H, which is evidence that Chrysler succeeded in providing buyers with the sort of roominess and accommodation they wanted even in a small car.

Unlike most of our previous Owner Survey groups, O-H drivers tend to drive moderately (60%), with only 35% describing their style as hard and a paltry 5% who claim to drive very hard. Only two other cars prompted their owners to drive moderately to such a great extent: the Peugeot 504 (56%), surveyed in July 1974, and the Jaguar XJ sedans (57%) covered in June 1978. And the 5% who drive very hard is less than half the average for all the cars we've surveyed since 1968. Certainly, the nature of the car determines driving style to a large extent and the O-H is not a sports sedan.

In terms of maintenance, O-H owners take care of their cars with approximately the same sort of diligence as others we've surveyed, with 34% saying they follow the manufacturer's recommended schedule, 26% who claim to follow it most of the time,

38% who say they do more than recommended and 7% who admit to not following it. We're somewhat surprised to discover that O-H owners don't think as highly of their dealers as the average for our surveys—20% rate the dealers excellent and 27% rate them good, for a combined total of 47%, some 10% less than the combined average from previous surveys. Twenty-five percent say the dealers offer service that's only fair, while 24% claim poor dealer service is the norm and 4% don't use the dealer, preferring to do the servicing themselves. One of the arguments that has traditionally been advanced for buying an American car is the reputed advantage in parts and service, but the returns from the O-H owners don't seem to bear that out as, along with the dealers, parts were more of a problem than we expected too. Thirty-three percent of the O-H owners said their cars were out of service while waiting for parts, but the average for the seven surveys we've done since we initiated that question is only 25%—rather surprising that parts would be less immediately available for an American-built car than for an import.

In examining the demographics of O-H owners, we discovered that these cars appeal to a wide variety of people, with no single occupational group standing out in numbers: 20% of the owners are managers of one sort or another, 14% engineers, 10% technicians, 6% each for sales, students and teachers. Four percent are craftsmen, while the remainder have vocations that range from architect to physicist. Half of the owners are 25-39 years of age, and 89% have attended or graduated from college.

Best & Worst Features

IT'S RARE to have unanimity in an owner survey report, but we came very close with 246 of the 250 O-H owners listing fuel economy as a best feature of their cars. Other characteristics that ranked high were use of space (63%), economy of operation (54%), fun to drive (42%), handling (42%), reliability (39%), price (36%), comfort (29%) and styling (24%).

On the other side of the ledger, what O-H owners feel are worst features are workmanship (61%), noise (47%), lack of quality (43%), dealer service (36%) and performance (24%). Considering the nature of the O-H, it's not surprising that owners would have a high appreciation for the fuel economy and space efficiency, as well as the economy of operating what is primarily a commuter/runabout car, well suited to shopping, running errands and the occasional longer trip. The high percentages of owners who are disenchanted with the workmanship and quality of the cars should be cause for concern on the part of Chrysler Corp. Quite a number of respondents wrote brief notes on this subject, mentioning a disturbing number of rattles in the car, or that "some interior finish details [are] slightly shoddy," in the words of a Cambridge, Massachusetts owner. Chrysler's current television advertising notwithstanding, there seems to be some doubt in the minds of many of these particular O-H owners that their cars are as well built as they could or should be.

Problem Areas

IT'S TIME to dispel the myth that American-built cars are more durable and reliable than foreign-made ones. The O-H is the 42nd car we've covered in this series of Owner Surveys (dating back to 1968) and is the 5th American-built car. The average number of problem areas for all the cars surveyed is a fraction more than 11. The average for the four previous U.S. cars (Chevrolet Corvette, March 1970; Ford Mustang, March 1971; Chevrolet Vega, June 1973; and Ford Pinto, October 1974) is 12. The O-H owners in this survey report 19 problem areas experienced by more than 5% of the owners. The positive note to be added here is that the percentage of O-H problem areas decreases with each succeeding model year—Chrysler, like most car companies these days, doing its final development work on the paying customers—and many of the cars' ills were eventually corrected as production went along over the course of the three years covered by this survey.

Five of the problems that surfaced are what we describe as

reliability troubles—ones that would make the car unsafe to drive or inoperable—including alternator/voltage regulator problems (32%), carburetor (36%), transmission (13%), distributor (12%), and clutch (10%). The average number of reliability troubles for all previous surveys is four.

In the problems that are not reliability related, 78% of the O-H owners complained about body parts that needed fixing. The ailments ranged from door handles, both inside and out, that wouldn't work, to hatch struts that failed and allowed the rear hatchback to close unexpectedly, as well as comment upon comment about pieces of trim and moldings coming undone. Minor, true, but nonetheless annoying to the car buyer. Others in this category are instruments (17%), front brake problems (16%), shift linkage (15%), wheel alignment (13%), lights (13%) and tires (12%). Problems that afflicted 5-10% were shock absorbers (8%), exhaust systems (8%), emission controls (6%), steering (6%), upholstery (6%), U-joints (5%) and air conditioner compressor (5%).

Buy Another?

IT SHOULDN'T come as any great surprise that the number of O-H owners who signified that they would buy another is well below the 75% average for all the cars we've surveyed—55% said yes they would, 26% responded they would not, and 19% were undecided. The only car we've reported on that had fewer owners who said they would own the same car again is the Rover 2000TC (November 1970) with 54%; while the Fiat X1/9 with 57% is the next closest (May 1977).

Among the owners of the small Dodges and Plymouths, the predominant comment of the 45% who were undecided or

negative about buying another is summed up best by the Chicago, Illinois owner who wrote, "The level of fit and finish must improve." And to the question that asked owners for suggestions for improving the O-H the most frequent response was that Chrysler should improve the quality of materials and workmanship. Others, such as a Torrance, California owner, were sufficiently discouraged to suggest that Chrysler be allowed to fold.

Another significant group of owners who wrote comments about the problems with their cars and why they wouldn't buy another found dealer service to be the crux of the matter, such as the St. Louis, Missouri owner who noted that, "dealer service, indifference and incompetence," would forestall her purchase of another O-H.

At this end of the automotive spectrum, most people are seeking reliable transportation cars that will carry them and two or three passengers or groceries or luggage hither and yon without a lot of fuss or bother. They are not expecting dashing and delightful motoring in the sports car tradition. The O-H falls into that category commonly referred to as "wheels." But this doesn't mean the buyers are not conscious of quality and workmanship. And the Japanese cars, the principal competitors in this price range, have demonstrated that lower-price cars don't have to be tacky and beset with ill-fitting pieces; nor do they have to suffer constant and chronic mechanical failures. There's been a lot of discussion about the Japanese limiting their imports of cars to give the American makers a chance to catch up... something the Japanese are not enthusiastic about doing. The results of this owner survey indicate that Chrysler's troubles are generated from within, not from without. And the solution, if the corporation is indeed going to survive, is to build better cars.

SUMMARY: DODGE OMNI/PLYMOUTH HORIZON

	Average for all Surveys since 1975	Omn/Horizon	Average for all Surveys since 1975	Omn/Horizon	Averages from all Previous Surveys
How Driven			Problems:		
Moderately	60%	35%	Common to 10% or more	12	7
Hard	35%	52%	Body parts		
Very Hard	5%	13%	Carburetor*		
How Owners Rate Dealer Service			Alternator/voltage regulator*		
Excellent	20%	28%	Front brakes		
Good	27%	30%	Instruments		
Fair	25%	21%	Shift linkage		
Poor	24%	21%	Transmission*		
(4% of the O-H owners don't use dealer for service).			Wheel alignment		
Maintained by the Book?			Lights		
Yes	34%	57%*	Distributor*		
No	7%	8%	Clutch*		
Mostly	26%	19%	Tires		
More than recommended	38%	34%	Common to 5-10%	7	5
*Surveys until May 1977 included those who did more than recommended maintenance in this category too.			Air conditioner compressor		
Buy Another of the Same Make?			Emission controls		
Yes	55%	75%	Exhaust system		
No	26%	17%	U-joints		
Undecided	19%	8%	Shock absorbers		
			Upholstery		
			Steering		
			Affecting reliability		
			5		
			*Represents a reliability area that could make the car unsafe or impossible to drive.		
			Total Mileage on Car Now		
			10,000-20,000		
			25%		
			20,000-30,000		
			36%		
			30,000-40,000		
			21%		
			40,000-50,000		
			14%		
			50,000+		
			4%		
			(Median 27,000)		
			Five Best Features		
			Fuel economy		
			Use of space		
			Economy of operation		
			Fun to drive		
			Handling		
			Five Worst Features		
			Workmanship		
			Quality		
			Noise		
			Dealer service		
			Performance		