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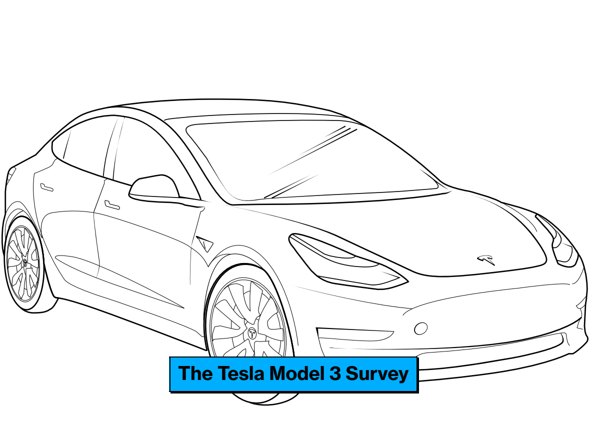


The Tesla Model 3 Survey

5,000 Tesla Owners Told Us What Elon Musk Got Right and Wrong

Quality & Reliability Part I
Service & Charging Part II Coming 10/31
Autopilot Part III Coming 11/05
Market Evolution Part IV Coming 11/07

By Tom Randall, Dean Halford and Cedric Sam
October 29, 2019

The biggest survey of Tesla drivers ever conducted shows that the automaker has finally figured out how to deliver cars with fewer problems, cutting the rate of defects nearly in half.

Tesla Inc. has sold more than 350,000 of its best-selling Model 3 sedans since 2017, and many of those cars have rolled out of the factory marred by defects: chipped paint, misaligned panels and, in fewer cases, mechanical troubles. These flaws became a point of fixation for the electric automaker's critics and a source of frustration for some owners. Depending on whom you asked, Tesla had just turned out one of the best-made cars in the world—or one of the worst.

The first comprehensive survey of almost 5,000 Model 3 owners, conducted by Bloomberg, found that the rate of defects peaked in the third quarter of 2018, with 80 issues for every 100 cars sold. This was when Tesla famously started up a new assembly line in its factory parking lot and tripled Model 3 production.

But Tesla is now cranking out almost 100,000 cars each quarter, and for the first time, there's data to show that experience and volume has brought consistency to its manufacturing operations. That's one of the key take-aways from Bloomberg's Model 3 owner survey: The rate of complaints from new owners declined 44% in the third quarter this year, compared with the same period a year ago.

A decade after cobbling together its first vehicle, Tesla has graduated from a niche maker of electric vehicles to a high-volume global manufacturer. This has been an experiment in creating a new kind of car, with unorthodox approaches to service, charging and software updates. The first several hundred thousand Model 3 customers essentially signed up to road test a new vision for the industry. Now, for Tesla continue its explosive growth, it must convince mainstream car buyers that it can deliver the dependability expected of a Toyota, Volkswagen or Ford.

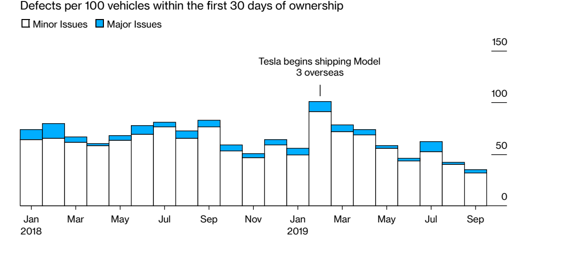
To track Tesla's progress, Bloomberg has been talking to the Model 3's early adopters. We started with a 164-item questionnaire that covers every aspect of having Tesla, and followed up with smaller surveys about crash repairs and new Autopilot features. So far, we've analyzed almost half a million words of feedback—enough to fill the first four Harry Potter books.

Do you own a Model 3?
Take the survey

The results are organized into four installments. Part I explores the car itself: reliability, performance, design and features. The other sections—covering customer service and charging, Autopilot, and the future of electric cars—will be released in the coming days. Tesla didn't respond to requests for comment.

The chart below shows Model 3 problems that came with the car or became known in the first month of ownership. Customers were asked to categorize each defect as a "major" or "minor" issue.

Quality Improves in 2019
Defects per 100 vehicles within the first 30 days of ownership

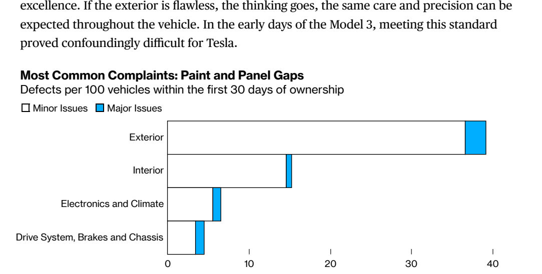


The worst single month for Tesla defects was February 2019, which recorded 101 issues for every 100 cars sold. That's when Tesla began overseas exports amid a dizzying stretch of changes to production and logistics that led to half of the quarter's deliveries rushed out in the final 10 days.

In the months that followed, initial quality improved considerably and reached a record low of 35 issues per 100 cars in September 2019, according to the owners surveyed. Most problems involve the car's exterior. Paint was far and away the biggest source of complaints, with about 12% of owners reporting an issue, followed by irregular gaps between body panels, then scratches and dents.

In the automotive industry these concerns are considered proxies for manufacturing excellence. If the exterior is flawless, the thinking goes, the same care and precision can be expected throughout the vehicle. In the early days of the Model 3, meeting this standard proved confoundingly difficult for Tesla.

Most Common Complaints: Paint and Panel Gaps
Defects per 100 vehicles within the first 30 days of ownership

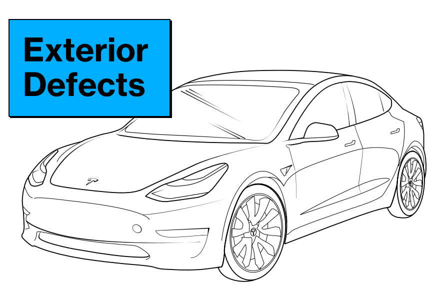


A limitation to Bloomberg's Tesla-only survey is that it doesn't provide comparable insights about longer-established automakers. One of the industry's biggest survey providers, J.D. Power, reported an industry average of 91 problems per 100 cars in 2019. Major differences in survey methodologies make direct comparison impossible. For example, J.D. Power asks owners for problems discovered in the first 90 days, versus the initial 30-day period in the Bloomberg survey. Tesla hasn't been included in J.D. Power's annual surveys.

The Model 3 survey can, however, identify Tesla's key problem areas and track their trajectory over time. Below we sorted thousands of reported defects by category: exterior, interior, electronics, and drive systems. We've identified the most common issues, which can be used to sort the responses.

"Panels had paint issues. The rear trunk is misaligned."

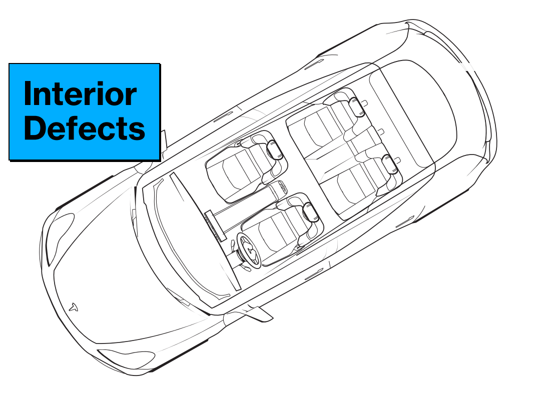
Exterior Defects



Type a word you want to filter with

"Driver's seat has been squeaking and Tesla has not been able to fix it."

Interior Defects



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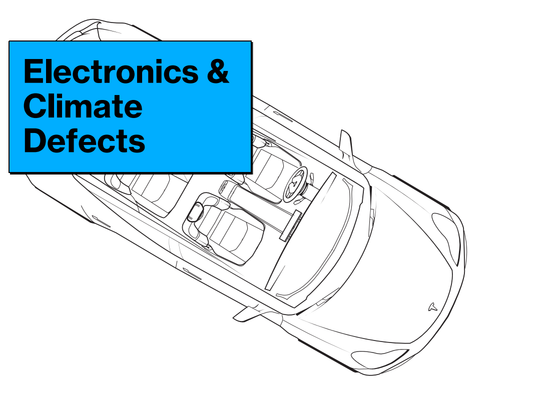
"Flat screen turned off randomly during driving. Fixed with an over-the-air update."

Electronics & Climate Defects



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"Tesla had to replace the high-voltage battery due to a wiring defect."

Drive System & Chassis Defects

Type a word you want to filter with

"Quality is measured in different ways. Being an average owner, I want the car to be mechanically sound and to just work."

After Model 3 owners enumerated any problems they encountered with their vehicle, we asked for additional feedback about overall quality and reliability. They had a lot to say. In the charts below, their replies are sorted using the overall reliability score each commenter gave the Model 3.

Owners Describe Model 3 Quality and Reliability

Ongoing Reliability (After 30 Days)

"All problems have been cosmetic. Car drives like a champ."

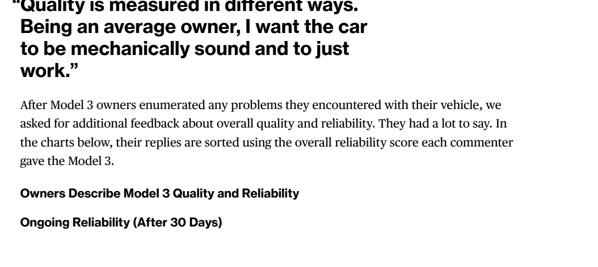
Notwithstanding its initial flaws, Tesla owners raved about their cars. This is something of a paradox found repeatedly in the Bloomberg survey—many of those owners who dealt with defects in their new Model 3 gave the electric sedan high overall marks for satisfaction. They gave their highest ratings to its design, performance, and some of the unusual software features that help define Tesla's brand. A nearly unanimous 99.6% of respondents said the Model 3 is a pleasure to drive, the kind of consensus rarely reached by any consumer product.

Design and Performance

"The car feels like the future, I can never go back."

Tesla frequently modifies its cars after sale through over-the-air software updates. These have been used to improve the car's acceleration and battery range as well as add video games to the car's 15-inch touchscreen. We asked about some of the core features of the car and some recent additions; Beach Buggy Racing is still the favorite video game. Some owners dinged the Model 3 for its limited range of voice commands and fussy automatic windshield wipers, which Musk this month promised to improve.

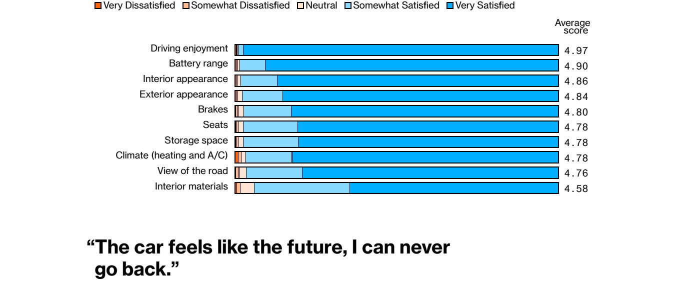
Features



Oct. 31, 2019

The Tesla Model 3 Survey

Part II
Service & Charging



Source: Data compiled by Bloomberg
Editors: Yue Qiu, Aaron Rutkoff, Dimitris Kesseniides and Mira Rojanasakul
Illustrations: Dave Merrill
Methodology
The Tesla Model 3 Survey is a followup to Bloomberg's award-winning Model 3 Tracker, a project launched in 2018 to generate real-time production estimates for Tesla's first mass-market car. The Model 3 Tracker relied, in part, on thousands of owners reporting Vehicle Identification Numbers; these early adopters formed the basis for an extensive email survey on the experience of owning a Model 3, which was subsequently opened to anyone who owns Tesla's lower-priced electric sedan.

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