

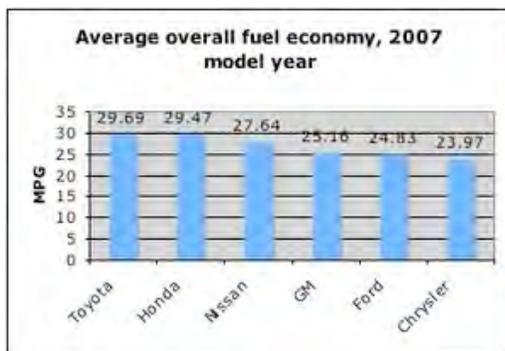
## Fuel economy for sale

When it comes to mileage claims, it's all about how you slice the salami.

With gas prices still in wallet-busting territory, fuel economy is front and center in auto company publicity campaigns. You'll be shocked to learn that the automakers' ads and press releases tend to shed more heat than light on whom consumers should trust to sell them a vehicle with the highest miles per gallon.

For instance, **General Motors** put out a release yesterday saying its 2009 lineup includes 18 models that get *30 miles per gallon or more* in highway driving, "more than is expected from any other automaker."

Although not every 2009 vehicle from every automaker has had its fuel economy rating listed yet on the EPA's handy website ([www.fueleconomy.gov](http://www.fueleconomy.gov)), GM appears to be in the lead right now. In part that's because the General used an old industry tactic of parsing exactly what constitutes a separate vehicle model.



Hence, the Pontiac G5 shows up three times (in its base, GT and XFE iterations), the Chevy Cobalt appears in both its sedan and coupe versions, and the Saturn Astra three-door and five-door hatchbacks both make the list.

GM defends the distinctions, arguing that the vehicles qualify as separate models because they have different body styles or powertrains (the Chevy Malibu, for instance, is listed in both its standard and hybrid versions) that result in different EPA ratings.

To industry observers, though, it smacks of hair-splitting.

"GM has to do it because of the perception that it doesn't have any cars that get 30 miles per gallon, so they have to drag out every obscure model they can find," said Peter Sealey, adjunct professor of marketing at the Drucker School at Claremont Graduate University.

**Toyota**, meanwhile, is running ads that claim industry leadership in vehicles that get *more than 30 miles per gallon* for the 2008 model year. The Japanese company also advanced the claim

this summer that it has “the best overall average fuel economy of any full-line automaker.”

Based on data from the government and the manufacturers, it appears that Toyota did edge out **Honda** for the mileage crown in 2007, with a fleet-wide average of 29.7 mpg versus 29.5. Since the government computes these averages based on actual sales, 2008 figures won't be out until next year.

But just in case, Toyota left itself some breathing room with the qualifier “full-line automaker.”

“We don't consider Honda to be a full-line automaker because they don't offer a full-sized pickup or SUV,” Toyota spokesman Bill Kwong said.

Honda doesn't really quarrel with that. In fact, they're happy not having any eight-cylinder Tundra pickups or massive Land Cruiser sport utes (EPA fuel economy in 2007: 13 mpg) dragging down their numbers.

But Honda, not to be outdone in the “We're No. 1” sweepstakes, puts forth the claim that it “has achieved the highest average fuel economy of any auto manufacturer” over the 15 years between 1992 and 2006. During that period, Honda spokesman Todd Mittleman said, the automaker posted a fleet-wide average of 30.4 mpg compared with an industry average of 24.9 mpg.

It's no mystery why the car companies feel the need to flaunt whatever fuel economy claims they can muster. Since gas prices started jumping a few years back, fuel economy has been the top concern for car buyers. And a survey of car buyers late last year by research firm J.D. Power found that perception counts for a lot when shoppers are looking for a gas sipper.

After gas prices started to go up, “manufacturers that had a reputation for high mileage got a lot of showroom traffic,” said Eric Noble, president of Car Lab, an automotive consulting firm in Orange.

Noble noted that Honda and Toyota in particular benefited from that trend. “So boom, everybody's ad campaign jumped on that bandwagon ,and now they're all talking about it.”

Even **Chrysler**, with the worst fuel economy among the six biggest automakers in the U.S. market, can boast that its Town and Country and Dodge Caravan minivans lead the pack with 24 mpg highway ratings.

Bewildered consumers are advised to tune out the corporate puffery and pay a visit to the [fueleconomy.gov](http://fueleconomy.gov) site, which provides EPA mileage data for vehicles sold in the U.S. dating back to 1985. There's also information on annual fuel costs and energy usage — even a measure of the vehicle's carbon footprint.

Of course, all of this emphasis on fuel economy comes as gas prices are sliding back down, leading to speculation about the staying power of car shoppers' current obsession with miles per gallon.

"It's kind of ironic," Noble deadpanned.

- Martin Zimmerman