Mazda USA Newsroom

THE NEW PREMIUM: NEW MAZDA SURVEY FINDS EXPERIENCE AND DESIGN OUTPACE THE BADGE

Modern drivers define luxury through intuitive technology, safety, and the joy of the drive

IRVINE, Calif., April 7, 2026 /PRNewswire/ -- Americans are rethinking what makes a vehicle feel truly premium—and the logo isn't it. According to a new survey commissioned by Mazda North American Operations (MNAO)[1], 81% of recent car buyers say the experience behind the wheel, from comfort to performance to intuitive technology, is what makes a car stand out. The findings underscore a growing shift: "premium" now means smart, human-centric design rather than status signaling.

When asked about their priorities, 93% of respondents said they would rather own a vehicle with more of what matters to them than a nameplate that costs thousands more. What counts as "more"? Space and practicality (40%), value with quality (36%), advanced technology and connectivity, dynamic driving enjoyment, and performance capabilities (30% each) topped the list.

Prestige barely made the cut. Only 7% of those surveyed defined "more" as status or social recognition, and just 19% said a brand's badge is what makes a vehicle stand out.

Safety has also emerged as a defining luxury trait, with 75% of respondents identifying advanced active safety and driver-assist features as essential markers of a high-quality vehicle. Mazda's engineering directly mirrors this consumer demand. In fact, the automotive manufacturer was recently recognized as Consumer Reports' first-ever Safest New-Car Brand. See here for more on Consumer Report's Safety Verdict.

"Drivers are shifting their focus to what genuinely improves their time on the road," said Jennifer Morrison, Director of Vehicle Safety Strategy at MNAO. "Comfort, safety, and features that support real life are winning out over labels—and people increasingly recognize they don't need to pay luxury prices for an exceptional vehicle."

Smart Spending Over Status Labels

Consumers surveyed overwhelmingly agree that paying extra for a traditional luxury badge doesn't make sense: 76% say the premium markup isn't worth it, and 83% believe buying a mainstream brand with a premium feel is the smarter luxury choice. For many, "premium" now means features that support how they actually live—from intuitive tech during long commutes to the comfort that makes a 6 a.m. school drop-off feel easier.

Even with a hypothetical $75,000 cash windfall, the trend remains unchanged. While respondents would prioritize financial security—retirement savings (67%), paying down debt (65%), and emergency funds (64%)—a significant 61% would still invest in a new vehicle. But only 46% would put that windfall toward a high-end luxury car. Instead, drivers surveyed say they want a vehicle that fits their lifestyle: space for weekend road trips, tech that keeps everyone connected, safety that gives them peace of mind, and performance that brings a moment of joy to the everyday drive.

The message is clear: modern luxury is practical, purposeful, and deeply personal—not performative.

Cars as Personal Sanctuaries

The survey also reveals that today's drivers see their vehicles as more than just transportation—they've become extensions of daily life. Many said they would make meaningful lifestyle tradeoffs if it meant driving their dream car for free for a year, giving up alcohol (59%), their favorite podcast (58%), manicures/pedicures (57%), new clothes and shoes (55%), social media (54%), sweet treats (53%), and even a gym membership (52%).

This willingness points to how emotionally connected people are to their vehicles. For parents, especially moms (40%), the car is often the only quiet place in a busy day—a moment to reset between school pickups and work calls. Gen Z drivers (45%) say the car is where they can be themselves, whether that means belting out their favorite playlist, decompressing after classes, or catching a few minutes of calm before heading home.

But while the car is a sanctuary, drivers still have standards. Respondents say they won't judge someone by the brand they drive—but they will notice texting while driving (75%), not wearing a seatbelt (68%), or a car that's messy or unpleasant-

smelling (62%). In other words, lifestyle choices matter more than labels.

"Today's drivers define luxury by what enhances their day-to-day life, not by what's on the grille," Morrison added. "When safety, comfort, and thoughtful design take priority over image, everyone on the road wins."

As drivers continue to redefine what premium truly means, Mazda's human–centric approach is meeting them where life happens—on school runs, weekend escapes, long commutes, and quiet moments of calm in between. The survey reinforces that today's luxury is lived, not labeled, and Mazda remains focused on crafting vehicles that elevate those everyday experiences through thoughtful design, intuitive technology, and safety that never compromises.

About Mazda North American Operations
Proudly founded in Hiroshima, Japan, Mazda has a history of sophisticated craftsmanship and innovation, and a purpose to enrich life-in-motion for those it serves. By putting humans at the center of everything it does, Mazda aspires to create uplifting experiences with our vehicles and for people. Mazda North American Operations is headquartered in Irvine, California, and oversees the sales, marketing, parts and customer service support of Mazda vehicles in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Colombia through approximately 795 dealers. Operations in Canada are managed by Mazda Canada Inc. in Richmond Hill, Ontario; operations in Mexico are managed by Mazda Motor de Mexico in Mexico City; and operations in Colombia are managed by Mazda de Colombia in Bogota, Colombia. For more information on Mazda vehicles, including photography and B-roll, please visit the online Mazda media center at news.mazdausa.com.

Follow @MazdaUSA on social media: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, and Threads.

[1] MNAO commissioned Burson Insights, Data & Intelligence to conduct the Mazda Sounding Board survey of n=1,000 vehicle owners in the U.S. who have purchased a vehicle in the past five years. The survey was conducted February 6-10, 2026 online using the PureSpectrum panel. The margin of error is approximately 3.1%.

SOURCE Mazda North American Operations

For further information: Drew Cary, Mazda North American Operations, media@mazdausa.com; Justin Pagtalunan, Mazda North American Operations, media@mazdausa.com

---

Additional assets available online:
PHOTOS (3)

https://news.mazdausa.com/2026-04-07-The-New-Premium-New-Mazda-Survey-Finds-Experience-and-Design-Outpace-the-Badge