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Stop settling for mileage mediocrity

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For years, I have suffered with high expectations. If the car I bought in 1979 got 30 miles to the gallon, if the fuel-efficiency was that good back then, didn't it follow that, with technological advances, a similar car purchased by 1999 would be getting 50 - and by 2009, maybe 60 - miles per gallon? Wouldn't there have been a steady progression in fuel efficiency for all makes and models, including minivans and SUVs? Wasn't that what Americans wanted?

John Davis, the host of Maryland Public Television's MotorWeek, has taken my questions and explained why this didn't happen: SUVs happened, trucks happened, cheap gas happened. The vehicles of choice for millions of Americans became bigger and burned more fuel, not less.

So here we are, still trying to catch up. And we have a long way to go.

Many of us remember gasoline shortages and rationing in the 1970s, when we had to wait in line to get our fill. There were a lot of grumps at the pumps. A lot of worried people, too. Many started buying smaller, lighter, more fuel-efficient cars.

I recently looked at mileage ratings for cars manufactured between 1978 and 1981 and was surprised at how many could reach 25 to 35 miles per gallon, city to highway. Some even rated more than 40 miles a gallon, highway. Volkswagen had several cars that could perform at that level, as did Toyota, Honda, Mazda and Datsun. But you could also buy Chrysler and Ford products that offered impressive fuel economy.

When I purchased my first compact in the 1970s, I figured each succeeding new car in my lifetime would offer better gas mileage. I assumed that engineers who designed our motor vehicles - from compacts to sedans, minivans to light trucks - would take us to great new mileage heights.

But, if you haven't been in the new-car market for a while (and if you suffer from the same delusions of expectations that afflict me) you'll be disappointed.

With only a few exceptions (mostly vehicles with hybrid technology), the mileage ratings are mediocre. From Consumer Reports, a few examples: Mercury Sable, the twin of the Ford Taurus, gets 18 mpg overall. The Mercury Milan does better, with 24 mpg, and the Chevy Malibu is rated at 25. The Mitsubishi Galant does 24, the Honda Accord 23, and the Toyota Camry and the Volkswagen Rabbit both get 24. (Note: The Rabbit of 1981 rated 40 city and 54 highway.)

I know what you're wondering: What's wrong with 24 mpg?

I get this response all the time, an indication of how much perspective we've lost during the age of the SUV. Many people who were single and driving compacts in the 1970s and early 1980s became parents driving SUVs and minivans during a time when gasoline became relatively cheap again. So, tell them they can buy a sedan in 2009 that gets 24 mpg and they think they're driving for free.

But steady research and progressive development should have raised the bar - for all vehicles - much, much higher by now. Thumb through Consumer Reports and you see car after car after van after SUV that get 13 to 18 miles per gallon.

We have settled for mediocre mileage for too long.

When the federal government's cash-for-clunkers program gets under way, it should be no problem for many Americans to gain the modest increases in mileage required. You have to purchase a new car that gets at least 22 mpg. I was set to argue that the program have a higher standard to make a real difference - that it only apply to new cars that do 30 mpg or better. However, that's still a very small market.

Too bad. Had we stayed on course and not taken that long detour into SUVs and trucks, we would have been in a better place today. Obviously, the automakers could have taken us to mileage heights years ago, and they can get us there in the next few, and promise to do so. But it will only happen, once and for all, if American consumers insist on it - and stop settling for mediocrity.

Dan Rodricks' column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. He is host of the Midday talk show on WYPR-FM.

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