

BUY! BUY! ...or bye bye?

Delving deeper into our Quality and Reliability survey, this month we look at the whole buying process

REMEMBER ONCE again that this survey considered only caravans up to three years old, and the average length of ownership was 1.3 years. Of these, 90% were purchased new, 4% were bought from dealers as demonstrators, 5% were bought used from a dealer and 1% were purchased privately. Of the 90% purchased new, 26% were bought at a show.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND...

With well over 200 dealers mentioned by respondents in the survey, a decision was made not to name them all individually in the published survey results. However, a small number of high-volume dealers stood out as having very satisfied customers, with two deserving special congratulations here. They are Knowepark Caravans in Livingston, West Lothian, and United British Caravans in Newcastle upon Tyne. Both were very highly rated in terms of the buying experience and subsequent servicing.

Also worthy of mention are high-scoring Couplands Caravans in Lincolnshire and Highbridge Caravan Centre in Somerset. Other volume dealers, including Lee Davey of Kent, Chipping Sodbury of Gloucestershire, Lowdham Caravans of Nottinghamshire, White Arches Caravans of Northants and Berkshire Caravans also came in the top 10 in both buying experience and servicing categories.

It is worth noting that there was a wide discrepancy between the high and low scores, with some high-volume dealers attracting a number of customers who described their buying and

servicing experiences as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

With the exception of Chipping Sodbury Caravans, the top scoring dealers were multi-franchise; but the names Abbey, Swift and Bailey cropped up several times, as did the phrase 'family-run business'.

However, for the remainder of this report, we will examine respondents' thoughts in relation to the make of caravan purchased. We will also split this into low-volume, ie under 30 units represented, and high-volume, anything above this number.

THE BUYING EXPERIENCE

Regarding the overall rating of the buying experience, in the low-volume category Carlight came first, followed by joint second placed Hobby and Hymer, then Vanmaster and Eriba. In the high-volume category top is Bailey, followed by Abbey, Sterling, Crown and Swift.

Manufacturers and their dealers who need to brush up on

"Condition on delivery is very important. Customers want to be able to have a good look around the interior..."

customer care include bottom-placed Vanroyce (trailer caravan production temporarily suspended), then ABI (no longer producing touring caravans), Bessacarr, Fleetwood and Compass.

Condition on delivery is very important. Customers want to be able to have a good look around the interior, try all the cupboards and

doors, open the windows and rooflights, fiddle with the taps, peer inside the fridge and oven, as you do, and know all works well, fits properly, looks right and feels right.

They also want the inside and outside to be clean and any extras ordered to be there. Not too much to ask when an average of £11,700 exchanges hands.

So, a wise manufacturer or dealer will have a PDI (pre-delivery inspection) system in place to ensure the customer is happy on these counts when taking delivery. Then the buying experience is more likely to be rated positively and any minor problems or inconveniences that occur later quickly forgiven. A problem on delivery is likely to prejudice future thoughts about the caravan and adversely colour any subsequent response regarding its quality and reliability. It's human nature.

Regarding specific delivery problems, a total of 45% of respondents had one or more problems that came under the following categories:

- rainwater ingress – 4%
- damage to the bodywork – 16%
- damage to interior fittings – 33%
- leaks in the water/waste systems – 16%
- faults that delayed delivery – 9%

These figures are all 2-3% up on our 1999 survey, which is a little disappointing, but things may not be quite as bleak as they seem. From individual comments received, we do believe many of these faults could be described as 'niggling' compared with some of the major problems encountered in 1999. Fair enough, any fault on an expensive new purchase is one

fault too many, but the price you pay for something does not necessarily reflect a lack of 'niggles', as any purchaser of a brand new house will tell you.

We also believe customers' expectations are rising and show less tolerance towards dealers or manufacturers failing to deliver that promised by the glossy brochure. Blame *Watchdog*, the internet, compensation culture or whatever you like, it is something that manufacturers and service suppliers in all areas are having to deal with.

HAPPY CUSTOMERS

So, who's up there delivering a caravan in good condition and thus a happy customer? Excluding small-volume producers, Sterling, Lunar, Coachman, Bailey and Abbey are showing the way. Of the small-volume makers, highly rated for condition on delivery are Carlight, Hobby, Hymer, Eriba and a miscellany called 'others'. This latter category includes chiefly German makes, so it does seem those who 'go Continental' are rather pleased with themselves.

WARRANTY WORK

One way of looking at the quality and reliability of the caravan in use, which is less subjective, is the number of warranty jobs required in a year.

In the car industry, less than one warranty job per annum is now the norm, but here we found an average of four warranty jobs a year. The miscellany of Continental caravans were least likely to need warranty work, with Hobby and Eriba included.

Of UK manufacturers with high volumes, Herald, Sterling, ABI, Bailey and Abbey all had fewer than three warranty jobs a year. However, the number of jobs required did not necessarily colour respondents' views of the quality and reliability of the caravan. More

important was how they rated the whole warranty experience.

For instance, Hymer had more than four warranty jobs per unit, but the experience was rated so highly it didn't seem to bother the owners. On the other hand Herald averaged just over two jobs, but clearly the experience was not a positive one, ranking them at 17th, below those with a higher level of work required.

THE CARAVAN IN USE.

We asked questions about the caravan in use, which would include ease of cleaning, bed make-up, operation of appliances etc, and also asked questions about its long-term quality and reliability (although long-term must be a relative view in respect of the age of the caravans in question).

These ratings were all slightly down on 1999, but again volume producers Bailey and Sterling headed the list. We also asked about serious faults, failures or premature wear, which would involve loss of use. The number of reported faults in this category had decreased from 25% in 1999 to 21% now, although this still involved 967 owners.

Problems described as significant include failures of water pumps, fridges, space heaters, water heaters and taps. The main increase over 1999 is in waste and water systems and, as these mostly use bought-in components, all manufacturers seem to suffer equally.

"failure of the water taps is serious enough to take the caravan off the road"

Although one might not think a failure of the water taps is serious enough to take the caravan off the road, owners think otherwise and don't take kindly to such a problem in a nearly-new caravan, or to lost days away. The majority lost the use of their caravan for up to seven days, although 20% went without for 8-14 days and a further 37% for over 15 days. Average loss of use is 20 days, down from 23 in 1999.

There is nothing more likely to annoy than a problem that won't stay fixed. It seems taps were the main culprit in the exasperating 'won't stay fixed' department.

One thought: if you shell out lots of money, are you likely to be more happy with your caravan? Not necessarily. While most of the small-volume caravans did have pretty happy owners, you could find happier ones that spent a lot less. These include owners of the top-rated UK volume producers and the imports. So money isn't the answer, but careful thought about the make you buy, and the reputation of the dealer you buy from, probably is.

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE

Finally, we asked respondents if they thought the quality and reliability of caravans is getting better or worse. Fourteen per cent said a lot better, 51% said better, 24% said the same, 10% said worse and just 1% a lot worse.

So, on the one hand respondents are down-rating many of the individual categories, just by a little. On the other hand well over half think quality is improving. We think this backs our earlier thoughts about faults being more 'niggling' than serious, and that customer expectations are rising. But for the record let's give five top tips to manufacturers and dealers to ensure they have even happier customers by the time of our next survey:

1. Sort out water ingress problems, particularly around windows and sunroofs
2. Make sure you have a good PDI system that detects any faults or failings before the customer does
3. Present the caravan on delivery in a clean and undamaged condition, inside and out
4. If warranty work is required, make it a pleasant experience for the customer
5. If you have to fix something, make sure it stays fixed!

Not rocket science, is it?

Next month: caravan manufacturers answer back