Mixed auto sales in US paint murky picture of car consumers

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Improved vehicle avaialability at GM brands like Chevrolet bolstered first-quarter sales.

Automakers reported mixed first-quarter US car sales Monday as some sedan models saw gains in a sign that vehicle affordability may be shifting consumer behavior.

General Motors, Honda, Hyundai and Nissan all reported higher US sales, while Stellantis and Toyota suffered declines.

The murky picture comes as average prices for new autos linger at around $50,000, a lofty price tag, especially in light of interest rate hikes that lifted the cost of car loans.

Citing much improved vehicle availability at dealerships, GM delivered 603,208 vehicles, up 17.6 percent from the year-ago period.

The figures topped estimates for GM from Cox Automotive, which saw a strong US job market as a supportive factor in an environment clouded somewhat by higher interest rates.

GM vice president Steve Carlisle described the period as a "great start" to 2023 saying the company has a "busy season" of product launches coming up.

"We gained significant market share in the first quarter, pricing was strong, inventories are in very good shape and we sold more than 20,000 EVs in a quarter for the first time," Carlisle said, referring to electric vehicles.

Key GM brands with higher sales included the popular Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra pickup truck brands.

But even bigger increases were seen in models such as the electric Chevy Bolt and the Chevy Malibu, a sedan that begins at around $26,000.

"Passenger cars have made a comeback recently," said CFRA Research's Garrett Nelson. "It's likely a reflection of affordability."

Meanwhile, Toyota reported quarterly sales of 469,558, down 8.8 percent.

Although Toyota's press release said the company was improving dealer inventories to "satisfy customer demand," the brand was rated the lowest in terms of daily supply of vehicles of more than 30 brands, according to a March 16 report from Cox Automotive, which said supplies were leanest for lower-priced vehicles.

In general, lean vehicle inventories have supported higher prices over the last 18 months or so, with factory shutdowns due to COVID-19 followed by shortages in semiconductors that slowed manufacturing.

Automakers are still dealing with supply chain problems, although the situation has improved somewhat compared with a year ago, industry sources say.

Stellantis, which reported a drop in sales of nine percent to 368,237, accounts for some of the brands with the loftiest inventories, such as Jeep and Chrysler, according to Cox.

Cox senior economist Charlie Chesbrough said Jeep sales are vulnerable to the double whammy of higher vehicle and borrowing costs.

"It is a mixed bag out there and everyone is trying to figure out who is their buyer," Chesbrough told AFP.

Among companies with higher sales, Honda scored a 6.8 percent jump to 284,507, with increases in car sales topping those in trucks.

At Tesla, which does not break out sales by country, deliveries rose 36 percent last quarter to 422,875, according to figures released Sunday.