

Toyota is still tops in Singapore

First-half registration figures show the Japanese brand still leads the market here, but luxury brands are having a stellar 2021, too.

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IF YOU'VE ever wanted to try your hand at being a car salesman, you might want to apply at Toyota. The Japanese brand is Singapore's top-selling carmaker so far in 2021, consolidating its usual position at the top of our market.

Registration figures for the first six months of the year (the latest released by the Land Transport Authority) show that it put 5,171 cars on the road, about two-thirds of its sales for all of last year.

By this year's halfway mark, the industry as a whole put 25,777 cars on the road, or nearly 58 per cent of the tally in the whole of 2020, which saw the pandemic effectively shut down the car industry for three months.

But in many ways, 2021 looks like a continuation of last year. The top five brands remain unchanged, and consist of Toyota, Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Honda and Mazda. Among them, Honda is unique in having lost market share, with its slice of the auto pie shrinking from 14.25 per cent to 10.14 per cent.

The two premium German brands in particular look set to eclipse last year's sales. At 4,191 units, Mercedes-Benz is already 63.9 per cent of the way there, while BMW's 3,100 registrations are a whopping 71 per cent of the whole of last year's.

As always with sales figures in Singapore, there are nuances to the numbers. Toyota's figures include Lexus, for example, so if its upmarket label accounted for more than 980 cars, that would put Mercedes-Benz in the top spot. Given that Lexus sold around 120 cars a month in 2020, that outcome is unlikely and the Toyota brand is probably still number one.

At the same time, the car industry usually makes a distinction between cars sold by authorised dealers and those brought in by parallel importers. With parallel importers thought to account for roughly one-third of Mercedes-Benz sales, that could put BMW (which has only 2 per cent or so of its registrations from parallel imports) narrowly ahead.

Regardless, the premium brand from Munich is enjoying a stellar year here. Importer BMW Group Asia said it has had a record first-half in Singapore. Managing director Christopher Wehner credited a "strong partnership" with the brand's dealer Performance Motors, bringing in the latest models and improving the servicing and repairs experience with lifting BMW's sales. "As proof of our hard work and efforts, we welcomed new customers to the brand and also managed to have our best first half ever in Singapore," he said.

Mr Wehner's three-year tenure at the helm of BMW Group Asia ends this month, but he returns to Germany in triumph after taking BMW to second place on the sales chart of official imports here in 2020. The brand's 9.78 per cent market share in Singapore was the highest among the countries where BMW imports its own cars, and its nearly 12 per cent share so far in 2021 means it looks set to repeat the feat.

Beyond the top five positions, registrations also show that sales have been vibrant in the ultra luxury segment, even in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

With 16 registrations so far this year, McLaren, the British super sportscar maker, has already equalled its 2020 tally. The same is true of Alpine (seven

units), a French brand that builds a lightweight two-seater powered by Renault engines.

At the pinnacle of the car world, Rolls-Royce has nearly achieved by the start of July (49 registrations) what it took all of 2020 to do (54 units). The same is true of Bentley, which saw 63 registrations in the first half versus 76 for all of last year.

On a broader level, sport utility vehicles (SUVs) have continued to be good business. After years of gaining market share, SUVs finally become the most popular kind of car in Singapore, accounting for 36.78 per cent of sales, pushing sedans down into second place (with 31.25 per cent of the market). Last year SUVs grabbed 33.54 per cent of the passenger car pie.

Alternative energy cars, meaning hybrids, plug-in hybrids and full electric vehicles, have also become significant sales drivers, aided by more generous rebates of up to S\$25,000 this year (up from S\$20,000) for low emissions cars, plus an additional S\$20,000 incentive for electric cars.

Such cars undoubtedly helped Toyota retain its hold on the top spot. More than half (55.13 per cent) of its registrations came from such cars, for example, up from 33.90 per cent in 2020.

The brand introduced three petrol-electric hybrid models that have sold well, kicking off the year with the Yaris Cross (a compact SUV) before launching the Harrier Hybrid (an executive SUV). It recently added a hybrid version of the Toyota Camry, a popular executive sedan, to its line up.

"The three new Toyota hybrid models we have launched this year showed that our product strategy is aligned with the Singapore government's direction in moving towards cleaner and greener vehicles," said Jasmmine Wong, CEO of Inchcape (the parent company of authorised dealer Borneo Motors) for Greater China and Singapore.

Brands with limited hybrid model ranges, such as Kia and Honda, saw their market share slip, while carmakers with fuel-saving electrification technology, such as Mazda and Nissan, saw theirs grow. The latter brand saw 48.54 per cent of its sales come from its e-Power line of hybrid cars or the all-electric Leaf, but this year such cars have accounted for 79.91 per cent.

One carmaker to watch that has yet to figure prominently on the sales charts is Tesla, the all-electric brand. Thirty new Teslas joined the car population between January and June, all of them parallel imported.

But the American company has set up shop here and, having delivered its first cars to customers last month, is officially up and running. Registration numbers for the rest of 2021 will reveal whether the newcomer is jogging or sprinting.