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Top 10 favorite cars of young buyers

By [Karen M. Kroll](#) • Bankrate.com

These definitely aren't your fathers' Oldsmobiles. They're not even his Ford Explorers, Acura Legends or Toyota Camrys. When it comes to cars, consumers between the ages of about 18 and 24 prefer fun, sporty compacts with prices that often are below \$20,000.

The sticker price is important, because many younger buyers aren't finished when they drive off the lot. "Younger car buyers generally like to spend a lot on upgrades and replacement parts," says Brian Chee, editor with [Autobytel](#) in Irvine, Calif.

That's because they're looking for distinctiveness, says Karl Brauer, editor in chief of [Edmunds.com](#), Santa Monica, Calif.

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"The big thing with Gen-X and Gen-Y is individualism and making a statement. So, they're interested in customizing cars."

At the same time, buying a moderately priced car and then gradually upgrading it usually better fits a young person's cash flow cycle. "They can't afford to buy a \$30,000 car," says Mary S. Butler, senior editor with [cars.com](#) in Chicago.

"However, they can afford an \$18,000 Mitsubishi Lancer. Then, with each paycheck, they might get something for the car." It's not unusual for the upgrades to eventually total up to between \$5,000 and \$10,000, say industry experts.

So which cars are 18- to 24-year-olds driving off the lots?

The 10 listed below are those with the largest percentages of buyers in this age range. These rankings are courtesy of Power Information Network, a Detroit-based affiliate of J.D. Power and Associates. The rankings reflect actual automobile sales for the period of July 1, 2003 to October 26, 2003.

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Mitsubishi Lancer

As a brand, Mitsubishi is a perennial favorite with younger buyers, says Butler of cars.com, noting that the company has targeted this group through its vehicle styling and marketing messages.



"A lot of times (in the ads), there's no commentary at all, just people in the car playing music and bopping. It says 'You're young and urban and this is your vehicle.'"

Mitsubishi's Lancer currently tops the lists of younger buyers. With a base MSRP of about \$14,400, the car hits the sweet spot of their pocketbooks. Its European styling, including side-marker lights, curved lines and roof-mounted antennas, also attracts members of the millennial generation. Fuel efficiency ranges from about 25 to 35 miles per gallon, depending on the model.

Most models feature a 2-liter, 120-horsepower engine, although the Lancer Ralliart engine offers a 2.4-liter, 162-horsepower model. Topping off the Lancer family is the Lancer Evolution. With a 270-horsepower engine, the high-performance Evolution is revved up and ready to go.



Acura RSX

The Acura RSX is something of an anomaly among the top 10. "I was surprised to see it on the list," says Butler. With an MSRP starting at \$20,025, the RSX is one the expensive side. The car currently is available only as a hatchback

coupe.

Tom Libby, director of industry analysis with Power Information Network, reasons that the car's appeal lies in the fact that it's at the bottom end of the Acura price range, and that it's a two-door sports coupe. "Those traditionally appeal to younger women."

Standard features include power doors, windows and mirrors. Under the hood, the RSX sports a 16-valve, 160-horsepower, 2.0-liter engine, although the RSX Type-S comes with a 200-horsepower engine. The metallic-face gauges on the dash emulate the design of a race-car cockpit. The bucket front seats offer integrated headrests, while the back seats split. The RSX seats four. Buyers who want to haul lots of gear will find nearly 18-cubic feet of cargo space in the back.

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Pontiac Sunfire

The Pontiac Sunfire also regularly tops the favorite lists of young buyers, due largely to its attractive price point and sporty styling. The starting MSRP for the Base Coupe 1SA is \$15,495, while the Coupe 1SB and 1SC start at \$16,615 and \$18,545, respectively. The Sunfire is available only as a coupe.



The Sunfire's rear spoiler, front bucket seats and front floor console also appeals to younger buyers who want a sporty look. Standard features include a 5-speed manual transmission, AM/FM stereo, rear and side window defoggers, and a theft-deterrent system.

The Sunfire features a 2.2 liter, 150-horsepower, all aluminum ECOTEC engine. Mileage estimates range from 24 to 33 miles per gallon.



Hyundai Tiburon

Hyundai's 10-year warranty resonates with first-time buyers, says Butler.

"It's such a large investment, many think that they will hold onto their first car for a long time," says Butler.

The Tiburon's sporty styling, with low-rise front and rear windows, aluminum wheels and rear spoiler, as well as an optional moon roof, also attracts younger consumers' attention. A five-speed manual transmission, power windows and door locks, cruise control, and rear window wiper are standard. A 2-liter engine powers the base model, while the Tiburon GT engine is 2.7 liters with 172 horsepower.

Younger buyers also like the Tiburon's sticker price. The base model starts at \$16,249, while the Tiburon GT V6 begins at \$18,599. Miles-per-gallon range from 19 to 30.

Volkswagen GTI

Almost all Volkswagen models do well with younger buyers, says Libby of Power Information Network, and the GTI is no exception. Teens and twenty-somethings like the GTI's performance and sporty features. The GTI 1.8T is powered by 180-horsepower engine, while the 2.8-liter, 200-horsepower engine makes the GTI VR6 a "pocket rocket," says Butler.

Younger buyers also like the look of the GTI. A roof-mounted "whip" antenna offers less wind resistance and a funky style, while 16-inch or 17-inch alloy wheels

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with a five-spoke design look sporty. A glass sunroof is optional. Inside, leather-trimmed seats are optional, while a leather-wrapped steering wheel is standard. Other standard features include cruise control, rear window defroster, power locks and stereo with a CD player.

The GTI's sticker price isn't the lowest, but it is within reach of many younger buyers. The GTI 1.8T starts at \$19,065, while the VR6 begins at \$21,995. Miles per gallon on both models ranges from about 22 to 31.

Toyota Celica

The Toyota Celica's low center of gravity and sharp design give it a fun, racy feel, and help ensure its place on many younger buyers' shopping lists. An optional "action package" offers aggressively styled front and rear bumpers, rocker panels and a rear spoiler. High-intensity discharge headlamps and a moon roof are optional.

Under the hood, a 1.8-liter engine runs at 140 horsepower, while the Celica GT-S offers 180 horsepower. "It's a high-revving engine," says Butler of cars.com. "It appeals to people who want to pull up to a stoplight and quickly pull away." Among the standard features are a tilt steering wheel, power mirrors, rear window defroster, and front seat airbags.



The Celica GT starts at \$17,905, while the GT-S starts at \$22,570. Gas mileage ranges between 23 and 33 miles per gallon.

Chevrolet Cavalier

Even if they're not in the market for a truck, young Cavalier buyers benefit from the fact that General Motors sells them. That's because the company also has to move a certain number of smaller, more fuel-efficient cars, such as the Cavalier, in order to meet its overall gas mileage quotas. The result is some great deals on Chevy cars, says Libby. He reports that a recent average price on the Cavalier, after incentives, was a very reasonable \$12,741.

The Cavalier, which comes in both coupe and sedan versions, is showing its age, and appears intermittently on the lists of top cars of younger buyers, says Butler.

A 140-horsepower, 2.2-liter engine, five speed manual transmission, AM/FM stereo with CD player, and a 60/40 split-folding rear seat are standard. A sport suspension package is optional.

In early November, the starting MSRP for the Cavalier Coupe Special Value package was \$10,700; the MSRP for other models started at \$14,610.

Ford ZX2

Like Cavalier buyers, purchasers of the Ford ZX2 also benefit from the number of larger, gas-guzzling SUVs and trucks that Ford sells, as it can mean good deals on Ford's other cars, says Libby. With a starting MSRP of \$13,750, the ZX2 is within reach of many first-time and younger buyers. The ZX2, which traces its roots to the old Ford Escort, is available as a two-door coupe.

The ZX2 sports a 2-liter, 130-horsepower engine. Standard features include a five-speed manual transmission, center floor console, 60/40 split-folding rear seat, AM/FM stereo, rear window rear defroster, and power outside mirrors. Leather-trimmed sport seats, a moon roof, fog lamps, power windows and locks, and a leather-wrapped steering wheel are optional.

Mazda Protégé

Unlike many of the other occupants of the top-10 list, the Mazda Protégé comes as a 4-door sedan. A newly launched Protégé wagon also is attracting the attention of the 18-24 year old set, says Butler of cars.com. "You can carry everything to go camping or crash at a friend's house. (The rankings include sales of both the sedan and wagon.)

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The Protégé traces its heritage back to the Mazda GLC, which actually debuted around the same time that today's 18- to 20-year olds were born. The current version was introduced in 1999.

The Protégé is offered in three trim levels. Standard features include power steering, a CD player, and split-folding rear seat. A 130 horsepower, 2.0-liter engine powers the car. The starting MSRP is \$14,200.

Honda Civic

Honda's reputation has helped its entry-level Civic brand win a spot in the hearts of younger consumers. "The Civics do well with younger buyers, because of Honda's strong reputation for reliability," says Libby. Cash-strapped members of the millennial generation who want a Honda will gravitate to its lower-cost Civic.

While the Civic isn't the flashiest car around, it holds its own, with updated

headlights, bumpers and a front grill on the 2004 models. The Civic also has earned a five-star frontal crash rating from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. A 115-horsepower engine powers the car. An integrated rear window antenna, adjustable steering column, remote fuel door and trunk releases, rear defroster, and cargo area light are standard on all models. The higher-priced LX and EX models also come with power windows, door locks and cruise control.

The MSRP on a Honda Civic DX starts at \$13,010; the LX and EX start at \$15,360 and \$17,260, respectively. Fuel efficiency ranges from 29 to 39 miles per gallon.

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