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Tesla's wonder cars tripped up by dumb door handles

Chris Woodyard, USA TODAY 11:20 a.m. EDT May 19, 2015

A visitor to the Tesla Motors showroom looks at a vehicle at the Dadeland Mall in Miami. (Photo: Joe Raedle, Getty Images)

The Tesla Model S was a breakthrough. The first long-range luxury electric car. Breathtaking acceleration. A 16-inch LED center display screen.

So after all that amazing technology was poured into one car, owners continue to be befuddled by a techno-glitch involving a feature as old as the car itself: the door handle.

Faulty door handles have been one of the issues that owners have complained about since the Model S was introduced. Even now, almost three years after its introduction, they are still a problem, as *Consumer Reports* just discovered on the \$127,000 performance version of the Model S that it just bought.

The magazine says it was able to get into the car from the passengers' side when the door handle wouldn't work, but then the car wouldn't shift into drive — apparently because the transmission won't leave the park setting if a door is thought to be ajar.

These are no ordinary door handles. Tesla's are unique in being flush against the car until the driver approaches. They extend when they sense the key is nearby.

The same magazine says it had similar door handle problems a year ago and it's a top complaint of 1,300 Tesla owners who have responded to the magazine's survey. Otherwise, they generally love the car.

"For a vehicle that changes everything, in powertrain and infotainment, it's strange to see a relatively mechanical system be their biggest problem," says Jake Fisher, *Consumer Reports'* director of auto testing.

Tesla Motor CEO Elon Musk, known for being finicky when it comes to details on the car like seat comfort, apparently doesn't have a fix in the works for balky door handles. Tesla officials say they know of none in the works.

Besides the cost of having to constantly fix them under warranty, faulty door handles are costing Tesla money.

When Milwaukee attorney Vince Megna sought to get Tesla to take back a car a year ago on behalf of a client under Wisconsin's Lemon Law, one of the complaints was about the door handles. After reading about *Consumer Reports'* latest finding Monday, Megna says he feels "vindicated."

Though Tesla's designs for door handles are unique, many other auto manufacturers wrestle with the same issues since keyless entry

has become a common feature on many cars. If drivers can't electronically access their cars, they need to have a backup way of opening a door. Often, automakers include a emergency metal key and lock cylinder somewhere.

Tesla says there are other ways to get into the car if the door handles won't work. If one door won't work, maybe the other will — as *Consumer Reports* testers found out. If the battery on the key fob dies, the doors will open if the key is placed on the cars' windshield.

Consumer Reports rates the Tesla Model S as "average" in expected reliability.

Fisher says the answer to the Tesla problem is simple: "They have to increase the reliability of everything on this car," he says. "They need to sweat the details."