

Family review: Dad-mobile

Low-key 2012 Mitsubishi Outlander offers driving fun but keeps it simple on interior features

By **COURTNEY MESSEBAUGH**
CARS.COM

After spending a couple of weeks test-driving the 2012 Mitsubishi Outlander, I've decided it's a great car for dads.

The 2012 Mitsubishi Outlander keeps it simple — maybe too simple — in its interior with low-key technology and not enough storage space, but its sporty exterior and agility on the road make it a fun car to have around.

Since its restyling in 2010, the Outlander hasn't changed too dramatically. For 2012, enhancements include an optional auto-dimming rearview mirror and a standard Eco indicator. There are also only three trim levels now as compared to four in previous years. The Outlander competes with heavyweights like the Honda CR-V and Toyota RAV4.

The 2012 Outlander starts at \$22,345 for the two-row base model. I tested the highest trim, the GT S-AWC with all-wheel drive and three rows of seats, which starts at an MSRP of \$27,895. With the addition of the Navigation Package and Touring Package, which adds leather upholstery, a power-adjustable driver's seat and a moonroof, the SUV cost \$33,605 as-tested.

Exterior

When compared with its rivals, the 2012 Mitsubishi Outlander's exterior is an original. Where the others are shapely and docile, the Outlander is aggressive. It sits low to the ground with



an insistently sporty front grille and strong lines throughout its body. The emphasis is definitely more on sport than utility.

In addition to the traditional lift-gate, there's also a small rear tailgate that flips down to make loading groceries or putting on your ski boots easier. It also creates a nice tailgating seat that can support up to 440 pounds, which means Dad can take this car to the game.

The top-of-the-line Outlander GT I tested comes with a 230-horsepower, 3.0-liter V-6 engine and a six-speed automatic transmission. My test car had optional all-wheel drive, which Mitsubishi calls Super All-Wheel Control and includes a center dial to select driving modes to optimize traction in varying weather and road conditions. This test car gets an EPA-estimated 19/25 mpg city/highway and premium gas is recommended.

The Outlander can also be had with a 168-hp, 2.4-liter four-cylinder and front-wheel drive that gets 22/27 mpg. This smaller engine uses regular gas.

INTERIOR

The three-row Outlander is an athletic crossover that Mitsubishi says can seat up to seven people. (Insert raucous laughter here.) Not even a family of clowns could fit seven people in this car. My small children had trouble fitting in the barely-there third row.

The rest of the seating is passably comfortable with enough leg and headroom, though once I installed a rear-facing infant-safety seat in the second row the front passenger lost his legs at the knees. The second row is easy to flip up and down for easy access to the third row.

In the front row, the controls are simple, circular and few. Technology is low-key; interior colors are unmemorable and the black-colored plastic and silver trim materials look and feel cheap. The center console is tiny as are the door pockets.

My test car was equipped with the Touring Package that adds a great Rockford Fosgate sound system, a moonroof and heated front seats with a power-adjustable driver's seat. It also had the optional Navigation Package that adds a backup camera. Mitsubishi's hands-free Fuse system, a rear entertainment system and a hard-drive navigation system with real-time traffic and digital music storage are all available.

Safety

The 2012 Outlander earned the highest score of Good in side-impact and frontal-offset crash tests conducted by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. It received the second-best score of Acceptable in rear and roof-strength crash tests. The SUV received four stars out of five in rollover crash tests by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

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dealers as a whole have been playing catch-up when it comes to finding ways to best serve digital customers.

Over the years, car dealers have mastered the technique of working with customers who walk into their stores. With the customer who reaches out to them over the Internet, well, that's a different story.

"We know what to do when customers come into our showroom," says Clint Thomas, general sales manager at the Sheehan Autoplex in Light-house Point. "It's the Internet customer who we need to be better with."

Thomas is among a growing number of local car folks who are recognizing the importance of treating those who contact their dealership online as potential customers, not just as anonymous prospects.

"We have to start treating people online like people," said Thomas, who recently attended a training session hosted by Cars.com that offered dealers advice on how to better reach online shoppers.

Gradually, digital customers are seeing a shift in how dealerships are responding to an online inquiry. In many cases, the responses are coming sooner, and they're also becoming more personal.

At Sheehan, for example, a customer recently contacted the dealership online looking for a specific vehicle. Within a short time, a salesman was contacting the potential customer back by email and then by phone and helping him find a vehicle that fit his needs. Eventually a professional relationship was established between the customer and salesman similar to one that you would find in a traditional showroom setting.

"Our goal is to respond to customers promptly and personally," Thomas said. "We are treating them like a customer, not like a lead."

When the customer found an

SUV that he was interested in, the salesman sent a video of the vehicle to assure him that it was in stock and on the lot.

For that customer, who lives more than 45 miles from the dealership, knowing the car would be there when he got to the showroom was important. And that is one concern online shoppers often voice when posting online dealer reviews.

Another concern for some online shoppers is that salespeople will call them when they would prefer to be contacted by email or text message. In some cases, potential customers avoid shopping online because they don't want to give out a phone number, which is often required.

Knowing that, some dealers are now adapting, reducing the number of required fields on the online form and asking for only a name and email address.

"Dealers know that delivering a great, convenient car shopping experience increases the likelihood you'll buy from them, and they understand that contacting you the way you want to be reached is part of that," says Linda Bartman, vice president of marketing for Cars.com. "As a result, most dealers will ask you about your communication preferences, so it's typically as easy as checking the right boxes."

So how can you be sure, when you're shopping for a car online, that you're working with a dealer who will treat you well?

One way, Bartman says, is to look at online reviews, which are available at Cars.com and other sites.

"Reading reviews about a dealership is a great way to make sure you're working with a reputable dealer," she said. "Knowing the type of car you want to purchase and your price range will only help the dealer understand your needs better, and having that information will make the quality of your interaction that much more positive."

Want to read more about what's going on in the automotive retail industry? Check out Rich Pollack's blog at www.southfloridaroad.blogspot.com. On the South Florida Road is written by Rich Pollack, an independent writer for Delray Beach-based Pollack Communications.