

Owner Survey: BMW 318i/325e

Surviving in style until the bigger Bimmer arrives

by Bob Nagy

If ever a vehicle has come to signify one's formal arrival as a success in contemporary American society, it's the 3-series BMW. Matching German craftsmanship with a requisite degree of price exclusivity, it has made and maintained a reputation as the darling of the Young and the Restlessly Affluent in big cities across the country. Though their numbers have proliferated of late, BMW's mystique remains surprisingly intact around the junior member of this legendary Bavarian family. That, among other reasons, prompted us to make the 318i/325e models the subject of our latest owner survey.

Our information was drawn from a national sampling of mid-1984 to early 1985 R. L. Polk & Co. registrations of new 3-series cars. Responses ended up skewed 60/40 in favor of the 325e. And, in keeping with a perceived performance image, 67.5% of the survey vehicles had the standard 5-speed manual transmission instead of the optional 4-speed automatic. Our fleet amassed a grand total of 2,793,544 in-service miles, with the average odometer showing just under 15,000.

Purists contend that the U.S. 3-series cars have always represented a considerably Americanized (read: emasculated) version of the small sedans BMW once sent to our shores. But, based on owner responses, both the 110-hp 4-cylinder 318i and the newer 121-hp 2.5-liter 325e six still have enough in hand to maintain their tradition of pleasing the nouveau prosperous. Our owner sample--80% age 25 to 49 and 75% men--reported five major criteria directly influenced their buying decisions. By far, the leading factor was performance (36.8%), with styling (27.5%), resale value (21.4%), reputation (20.3%), and quality (19.2%) rounding out the primary list.

Responding to the performance inquiry, over 91% rated their cars excellent or good, but several, primarily 318i drivers, complained of noticeable off-the-line bogging. As a whole, the group was clearly taken with FTD fever, with 73.7% assessing their BMW's fun-to-drive capabilities as excellent and another 21.2% granting them good marks. Judging by the comments of many, these were the first real "driver's cars" they'd ever owned. The handling question elicited even more extensive owner kudos. A remarkable 99% put their cars into the top two scoring categories.

Our fuel economy question provided an interesting--if unexpected--response. Although the EPA found it slightly thirstier than the 318i's 4-cylinder, the 325e's bigger, economy-oriented "Eta" six was reported by our sample to have run up better MPG figures in both city and highway modes, regardless of transmission. Perhaps a case of sloppy math, or perhaps more a reflection that the 318i often ends up being driven harder merely to hold its own.

Our survey respondents also heaped high praise on the BMW's superb 4-wheel disc brakes. Almost 70% called them excellent, while only 2.5% placed them in the fair/poor category. However, we did receive a small number of mystifying responses from individuals who went on to rave about the wonders of the ABS anti-lock system, which, while standard on the '86 325e, was not available on any 3-series car in 1985. We're not sure whether the erroneous belief was generated by misreading promotional material about the rear proportioning valve or by unscrupulous salesmen using it as a tool to dupe unsuspecting customers, but it certainly made for some amusing reading. One Illinois owner wrote, "I bought my car in the winter and the first thing I did was test the ABS brakes on an ice-covered surface. They worked perfectly." To her we can only reply, sometimes it's better to be lucky than smart.

The Achilles' heel of many prestige brand dealers frequently manifests itself as a pathological bent toward the monetary abuse of clientele. For all the bad rapping BMW stores endured, it was refreshing to hear that a large number of our respondents felt they were treated fairly by their local outlets. At the time in question, the 318i 2-door model based at \$16,430 and the 325e 4-door listed at \$21,105. The average car in our survey cost \$20,670. The \$10,000 price spread ran from \$16,000 (318i on the Euro-delivery plan) to \$26,000 (325e on the greedy U.S. dealer plan), and less than 10% sold for under \$18K. While few had any kind words about the deals they were offered, 78.4% gave their outlets

excellent/good marks in near equal numbers, ranking BMW sales staffs second only to Audi dealers when it came to mitigating the effects of sticker shock on customers.

Our survey BMWs received exceptional marks for quality and workmanship. The 96.3% of our owners who gave them excellent/good scores elevated the 3-series to a fairly rarefied atmosphere. In all our surveys to date, that figure has been bettered--and then just marginally--only by the Audi 5000, Porsche 944, and Toyota Supra.

Despite this accolade, the Baby Bimmers were not exactly perfect, and 46.6% of our owners reported some mechanical problems. Although better than (surprise) the Audi 5000, Porsche 944, Chevy Corvette, Pontiac Fiero, and our current problem child record-holder, the Nissan 300ZX (61.7%), it's a far cry from the exemplary 17.7% figure generated by the Honda CRX and hardly the kind of reliability one associates with the stuff of which legends are made.

Far and away, the bulk of the problems afflicting these cars involved faulty power windows. Over one quarter of our owners reported failures with that system, usually in the form of fried motors. The only other troubles affecting even 10% of these vehicles involved the clutch and a variety of electrical gremlins. As far as service work was concerned, most owners characterized their local shops as somewhat pricey but relatively competent and courteous. The top two rating categories accounted for 49.2% and 30.3% of their votes respectively. Among the remaining disgruntled minority, most griped about the inability of some shops to recognize and diagnose more complex problems, about high service charges, and about the need to return more than once to have improper repair work redone.

The most common plea on the wish list of future changes involved more power underhood (16.1%). The only other response to break into double figures was "No changes," an observation that typified the overall feelings of satisfaction held by most owners. And these are people who clearly expect the good life to get even better. Although 77.7% reported they would buy another 3-series BMW, 93.4% plan to move up the BMW line when it comes time to turn in their present car. Closing comments frequently included: "It's the best car I've ever owned" sentiments. Those words are destined to keep happy thoughts running through the minds of BMW execs both here and in the fatherland.

Owner Survey: BMW 318i/325e

VITAL STATISTICS:

Engine:

6-cylinder.....60.0%
4-cylinder.....40.0

Transmission:

5-sp. manual.....67.5%
Automatic.....32.5

Average mpg (city/hwy.):

Man. trans.....24.2/30.1
Auto. trans.....23.0/29.4
4-cyl. eng.....23.6/29.3
6-cyl. eng.....24.0/30.3

Average price: \$20,670

Total vehicle miles: 2,793,544

Average miles/vehicle: 14,500

PURCHASE CONSIDERATIONS:

Why did you buy a BMW?

Performance.....36.8%
Styling.....27.5
Resale value.....21.4
Reputation.....20.3
Quality.....19.2

Dealer sales practices:

Excellent.....38.9%
Good.....39.5
Fair.....13.5
Poor.....8.1

Dealer service practices:

Excellent.....49.2%
Good.....30.3
Fair.....13.0
Poor.....7.6

Would you buy another 318i/325e?

Yes.....77.7%
No.....22.3

Would you buy another BMW product?

Yes.....93.4%
No.....6.6

PERFORMANCE/CREATURE COMFORTS:

Performance rating:

Excellent.....56.5%
Good.....34.7
Fair.....7.3
Poor.....1.6

Fun-to-drive capabilities:

Excellent.....73.7%
Good.....21.1
Fair.....4.6
Poor.....0.5

Specific likes:

Handling.....43.7%
Style.....31.1
Performance.....30.6
Comfort.....10.9
Quality.....10.4

Overall quality and workmanship:

Excellent.....75.4%
Good.....20.9
Fair.....3.2
Poor.....0.5

Braking:

Excellent.....69.4%
Good.....28.1
Fair.....2.0
Poor.....0.5

Handling:

Excellent.....85.3%
Good.....13.7
Fair.....1.0
Poor.....0.0

Front seat comfort:

Excellent.....49.7%
Good.....39.0
Fair.....9.7
Poor.....1.5

Rear seat comfort:

Excellent.....17.0%
Good.....51.1
Fair.....27.1
Poor.....4.8

PROBLEMS/COMPLAINTS:

Mechanical problems:

Yes.....46.6%
No.....53.4

Types of mechanical problems:

Power windows...25.8%
Clutch.....12.4
Electrical.....12.4
Transmission.....6.7
Computer.....5.6
Fuel injection.....5.6

Specific complaints:

No complaints.....19.8%
Power.....16.3
Price of service.....11.0
Comfort.....7.6
Price of car.....6.4

What changes would you like to see on the 318i/325e?

More power.....16.1%
No changes.....12.4
Lower price.....8.1
More comfort.....7.5
Better braking.....4.3
More rear leg room...4.3