

Quality Progress

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TIRE FAILURES, SUV ROLLOVERS PUT QUALITY ON TRIAL

Quality Experts Offer Perspectives
On the Causes and Effects

Turnaround Lessons From Hong Kong

ASQ Enhances International Strategy

A Look at Quality The World Over

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Features

Product Safety and Reliability

30 Tire Failures, SUV Rollovers Put Quality on Trial

The Bridgestone/Firestone recall and subsequent reports about other manufacturers' tire failures and about the tendency for SUVs to roll over are perhaps the biggest quality related stories to break in more than a decade. The question being asked is whether quality management systems can offer assurance to the public that products are safe and reliable. Eleven representatives of the profession offer their perspectives.

SUSAN E. DANIELS

63 Quality Professionals Around the World Share Similar Concerns, Experiences

ASQ's International Chapter now numbers 5,000 plus members in about 90 countries. Several of ASQ's country councilors summarize the state of quality in various parts of the world, demonstrating that worldwide quality awareness is increasing as global competition and the desire for improved living standards grow.

NAVIN SHAMJI DEDHIA

Quality Around the World

49 Moving Organizational Mountains

With profit growth deteriorating, employees lacking enthusiasm and energy, and Hong Kong transitioning to Chinese rule, the new managing director of a company listened, learned and began to change its whole culture. How this was done and the impressive results make a compelling quality story.

DAVID CHOO KAH TECK AND PETER M. TOBIA

57 A World of Opportunity

Times are changing, and ASQ's new WorldPartners program is redefining relationships between the Society and quality organizations outside the United States. The emphasis is on collaboration, and the developments are very exciting.

SPENCER HUTCHENS JR.

QP INTERNET BONUSES

• Go to the QP forum at www.asqnet.org and weigh in on quality and the tire failure and SUV rollover situation.

• Tell us what you think of this issue of QP at www.asq.org/m/qpsurvey_december.html.

Lessons From Firestone: It's in Your Hands

by R. David Pittle

The latest Firestone tire recall will go down in the pages of consumer product safety history as an event that inspired passage of tougher federal automotive laws to protect the public. The National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration (NHTSA) has been directed by Congress to upgrade its tire standards and be more effective in finding and ridding the market of defective products.

But whatever a government safety agency does, it is playing catch-up compared to what the manufacturer could have done because injury and complaint data usually arrive at the manufacturer's doorstep first. Moreover, the manufacturer makes design and production decisions early on that affect the product's endurance and the consumer's experience.

The way manufacturers direct engineers to handle emerging safety problems--both before the product reaches the marketplace and after it is in the hands of consumers--greatly affects whether the problem is nipped in the bud or grows into a national crisis.

Many of the questions that emerged in the congressional hearings held in the wake of the Firestone recall focused on who knew what and when. Legislators and consumer groups asked both Ford and Firestone to explain why the government and the American public had not been notified earlier of Ford's overseas recall program and of the lawsuits dating back to 1992 involving Firestone tires. Questions were also raised about why Ford recommended that consumers use tire pressures for the Ford Explorer lower than that recommended by Firestone. These queries pointedly suggested that many of the tragic deaths and accidents could have been avoided if prompt action had been taken when trouble first appeared.

Consumers are pretty understanding people. They don't expect manufacturers to be perfect, but they do expect manufacturers to side with them when safety decisions are made. They expect manufacturers to design products with safety as an inherent priority, not as a luxury add-on. Consumers can choose stereos for their cars, but they depend on the manufacturer to select the appropriate tire design and pressure. They

depend on the manufacturer to design an SUV that is reasonably stable without being sensitive to a slight change in tire pressure.

If manufacturers are serious about reducing risks to consumers, and they should be, they must encourage their engineers to factor consumer behavior patterns into product designs--and not expect consumer behavior to adapt to and compensate for dangerous designs. They must also be ready to consider changing designs as soon as safety problems surface--and avoid falling into the trap of defending their products by blaming the victims.

Failure to promptly address consumer complaints only delays and exacerbates problems. Sooner or later, these problems find their way to the surface. And

when they do, the costs are much higher than they would have been earlier on. Failure to report suspected defects results in loss of consumer trust and loyalty. And too often, that cost is measured in the loss of consumers' lives.

Failure to report defects to the appropriate agency can also

result in sanctions against the company in the forms of civil and criminal penalties. Consumers Union has pushed for legislative protections at the federal level similar to those found in the California Corporate Criminal Liability Act. Signed into law in 1990, this act holds manufacturers accountable when they knowingly sell dangerous, defective products to consumers. The act was created to help assure that individual managers would not decide to withhold vital safety information that could result in death or serious harm to consumers.

The sad truth is that the use of sanctions signals a failure in attitude. Enlightened companies view consumers as partners throughout the process. They are as eager to help separate their customers from a product later found to be defective as they are to sell that product in the first place.

The Firestone and Ford tragedies highlight the need for all of us, especially knowledgeable people on the inside who make decisions about both a company's bottom line and its assembly line, to be more vigilant watchdogs.

"If there is a primary cause of system failure, it is probably found in 4.1 Management Responsibility"

William M. Harral

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