

Exercising Consumer Rights Through The Use of The Auto Safety Hotline

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The American public strongly supports the promotion of traffic safety by the federal government. And, most people believe that the government should take an active role in educating the public about motor vehicle and highway safety (Boyle, 1996). Many believe such information could be conveyed effectively through a national safety hotline, but few realize that such a hotline exists already.

The Auto Safety Hotline of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), an agency of the U.S. Department of Transportation, represents governmental action to help identify safety problems in motor vehicles. Consumer educators have the unique opportunity to promote this toll-free safety hotline to young consumers, which helps them assert their consumer rights to information and safety. The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to investigate whether college students were satisfied with aspects of the service provided by the NHTSA's Auto Safety Hotline; and (b) to determine if students were aware of recalls on their automobiles before they called the Hotline number.

Background

An increasing number of businesses and government agencies are using toll-free numbers to communicate with consumers. Consumers find that using a toll-free number is more convenient than writing to obtain information, seek redress, and give compliments (Martin & Smart, 1994; Reiter, 1991). Researchers have explored issues related to consumer communication by written correspondence (see, for example, Bearden & Oliver, 1985; Crawford, Lawrence, Prawitz, & Moser, 1996; Gilly, 1987; Kinney & Pritchard, 1986; Prawitz & Lawrence, 1993; Singh, 1989). A limited amount of empirical research related to 1-800 calling experiences is available (Boyle, 1996; Flesher & Buttross, 1992; Leinicke, Ostrosky, & Rexroad, 1994; Martin & Smart, 1994).

In 1995, NHTSA conducted a customer survey of over 4,000 consumers to determine attitudes about traffic safety issues (Boyle, 1996). Nearly all (98.8%) consumers thought it important that

information be available to consumers about motor vehicle recalls. However, of those who had received notice of recalls on their automobiles, nearly 25% had not had the problem or defect repaired. Some in this group said the vehicle had been sold already, 12% reported that they "knew the vehicle was okay," and 10% said they were "too busy" to have it repaired or "hadn't gotten to it" (6%). A variety of other excuses were offered for not having the repairs done. This raises the issue of the disparity between consumers' right to information and safety, and the accompanying consumer responsibility to follow through on safety recommendations.

Methods

The sample consisted of 72 midwestern college students enrolled in a fall, 1996 family finance class. Most of the students were female (85%) and had a junior (44%) or senior (38%) class standing.

The students were asked whether the automobile that they used most frequently had been recalled. Those who did not own an automobile referred to the vehicle their families used most often. All 72 students then called the Auto Safety Hotline to determine if indeed their automobiles had been recalled. Students reported their findings on a questionnaire designed by the researchers, indicating the response they received (recalled or not recalled; if recalled, why?). Using a five-point Likert-type scale, students indicated their satisfaction with the Hotline service. Additional items measured were satisfaction with specific aspects of the service such as ease of use, personnel, usefulness of information, and intent to use again.

Findings

Prior to calling the Auto Safety Hotline, few students (17.8%) indicated that their vehicles had been recalled. Following their calls, 71.2% of the students indicated recalls on their automobiles. Most (91%), regardless of the recall status of their vehicles, were satisfied with the service overall regardless of the recall status of their vehicles. Likewise, all aspects of the Hotline service elicited positive responses (see Table 1).

Students agreed or strongly agreed (85%) that it was easy to get through to the Hotline service. Only 7% agreed or strongly agreed that the line was continually busy. The majority (58%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had to wait to speak to someone. Few of the

students (6%) agreed or strongly agreed that once connected with a person they had to wait too long for personnel to look up information.

Students agreed or strongly agreed that personnel were courteous (85%) and professional (78%). Likewise, many (69%) agreed or strongly agreed that personnel were knowledgeable. However, there was more uncertainty (25%) associated with this aspect of the Hotline than with any other.

Table 1. Evaluation of Aspects of Services

Aspect of Services	Level of Agreement				
	SA	A	U	D	SD
It was easy to get through	40%	5%	3%	11%	0%
Line was continually busy ^a	1%	6%	0%	22%	70%
Had to wait to speak to someone ^a	18%	40%	3%	19%	19%
Had to wait too long for personnel to look up information ^a	1%	5%	1%	59%	31%
Personnel were courteous	33%	52%	4%	10%	0%
Personnel were professional	31%	47%	4%	5%	1%
Personnel were knowledgeable	29%	40%	25%	4%	1%
Information was useful	41%	40%	7%	5%	3%
Information obtained was worth the time it took to make the call	37%	40%	7%	11%	4%
After the call, I had a favorable impression of the hotline	27%	45%	15%	7%	4%

Note. SA = strongly agree; A = agree; U = uncertain; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Figures may not equal 100% due to rounding.

^aThe more desirable response is disagree or strongly disagree.

Most (81%) agreed or strongly agreed that the information was useful. Similarly, a large percentage (77%) agreed that the information obtained was worth the time it took to make the call. Nearly three-fourths of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had a favorable impression of the Hotline, and when asked if they would call the Hotline again, 81% stated "yes."

Discussion and Implications

Overall satisfaction with the Auto Safety Hotline was high, with an overall positive assessment of the specific aspects of the Hotline. Students found the Hotline useful and reported they would use it again. However, some expressed concern that recall information they had received from the manufacturer was not available from the Hotline. That is, some callers whose vehicles had been repaired as a result of a recall were told by the Hotline operator that there had been no recalls on their automobiles. Others reported that when they checked for recall information on the Internet, the information was different from that obtained from the Hotline operators. In all cases, when students asked Hotline personnel about the discrepancy, they were told to check with the dealer or the manufacturer about their particular vehicle.

Some students said that Hotline personnel were not as knowledgeable as they would have liked. For example, when callers asked operators to expand on the recall problem, they were unable to do so. In some instances, Hotline personnel stated that they had no knowledge or information concerning what the recall information meant and suggested the caller contact the dealer.

The most frequent complaint was that the Hotline's automated telephone menu needed simplification. The menu includes no specific reference to recall information, so callers wanting this information were confused as to which menu option to choose. Some students became frustrated and made several calls before deciding to stay on the line and wait for an operator. Would consumers not motivated by a class assignment be determined enough to do the same?

It is interesting to note that many students who thought their automobiles had not been recalled learned from their Hotline experience that recalls had been issued. It appears that continued publicizing of ways to obtain recall information is necessary. During class discussion, several students mentioned neither they nor their friends had ever heard of the Hotline. According to the NHTSA survey (Boyle, 1996), only 27% of randomly selected consumers were aware of the existence of the Auto Safety Hotline. When asked who sponsored the Hotline, only 3% correctly identified the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (Boyle).

For consumer educators, the NHTSA Auto Safety Hotline provides an excellent opportunity for educating students, relatives and friends of the students. During the class discussion with this sample of college students, most of the students who completed the survey indicated they had told at least one other person about the Hotline. Particularly, in the case of high school students, who are less likely to own cars, an assignment to call the Hotline for recall information on the family car certainly would initiate parental involvement. Students would then pass recall information on to their parents. Such an assignment could serve as a springboard for a discussion of consumer rights and responsibilities.

Consumer educators using the questionnaire items presented in Table 1 could have students compare the results of the class survey with the results of this study. The study also might serve as a springboard for other class projects. For example, students could evaluate other government and business hotlines, explore the differences between 1-800 and 1-900 numbers, and perhaps look into other issues related to the rights and responsibilities of consumers, such as Internet privacy and tobacco usage.

Educators interested in replicating this study or adapting the instrument for use in their classrooms may contact the authors. The instrument and accompanying instructions are available upon request.

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