

Toyota Promises Quality Control Overhaul

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TOYOTA, Japan (AP) — Toyota promised to respond faster to customer complaints as it held its first meeting of a quality experts committee set up to help salvage a reputation battered by massive recalls and reports of runaway vehicles.

Toyota Motor Corp. appointed chief quality officers in key regions — including North America — where the biggest problems have surfaced to convey customer complaints quickly to its headquarters. It promised to add outside experts, including former U.S. Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater, in evaluating quality measures.

"Listening to consumer voices is most important in regaining credibility from our customers," said Toyota President Akio Toyoda at a news conference after the quality committee met. "We are setting up a system to respond more quickly to complaints."

Toyota has recalled more than 8 million vehicles around the world since October for defective gas pedals, faulty floor mats and braking software glitches. Most of them have been in the U.S., where Toyota sales fell 9 percent in February, according to Autodata Corp.

The quality committee meeting brought together 70 executives and autoworkers from Toyota's global operations at the automaker's headquarters in central Japan.

Toyoda said the company needs to listen more carefully to proposals for better quality, including what drivers are saying.

The company said the quality panel of outside experts will issue its first evaluation report in June, and the quality committee will meet regularly to exchange insights and tackle safety issues.

But Tatsumi Tanaka, a crisis management expert who heads Risk Hedge in Tokyo, said Toyota needed to show that its regional businesses will have the autonomy to act and do more than just communicating complaints to headquarters.

"It's not enough to say officials got together and met. You need to put people's worries to rest," he said.

The quality officers denied anything had been seriously amiss before, or that the new panel signaled radical change.

"I'm actually very excited about the new process. I represent the voice of the customers from North America, and it's my job is to make sure it is fully understood," said Steve St. Angelo, the North American quality official.

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But it was unclear how Toyota can hope to resolve lingering worries that the problem of unintended acceleration in some of its cars may be rooted in an electronic or software defect — an allegation that Toyota has repeatedly denied.

"It is in Toyota's best interest to find the cause as quickly as they can, using all the help they can get. Trying to save face will ultimately fail," said Bob Landman of H&L Instruments, an electronics company in North Hampton, New Hampshire, who has been a vocal critic of Toyota's handling of recalls.

Landman is among the experts who have argued that software glitches and a short circuit caused by the use of lead-free materials in car parts are among the possible explanations for unintended acceleration.

Also Tuesday, Toyota said it will add a brake override — a system that allows the brakes to work if they are pressed together with the accelerator — to new models starting this year. That follows reports in the United States of vehicles speeding up on their own.

Under an effort to beef up quality checks, Toyota said it will set up four additional facilities to train employees in quality controls — in North America, China, Europe and Southeast Asia — modeled after the training center it already has in Japan.

The company said it will expand the use of "black box" data recorders that can help analyze the causes of accidents and speed up communication among quality control teams to make faster decisions on recalls.

Toyota showed reporters its facilities at headquarters, which are designed to check on possible defects in vehicles and parts targeted in consumer complaints.

Among the tests were an X-ray machine that presented three-dimensional computer imagery, an area that simulated heavy rains with water squirting from 400 nozzles, and a room that got both freezing cold and steaming hot to check how vehicles react under extreme weather conditions.

The media tour was intended to illustrate the hard work at the automaker to ensure quality control and respond to driver complaints. Toyota has acknowledged that the company may have failed to be as quick or responsive as consumers would have liked about defects, especially overseas.

Toyota's North American sales appear to be recovering this month. Toyota, which generally does not offer big incentives, has begun offering zero-percent financing deals on some models in the U.S. to bring customers back into showrooms.

Toyota's bottom line is expected to suffer, perhaps by billions of dollars, from a spate of lawsuits being filed by consumers, including some who say they suffered damages from defective Toyota vehicles.

After the crash of a Prius hybrid in New York this month, police said the driver, not the car, was to blame. Officials are investigating another Prius that reportedly

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accelerated on its own in California.

"To ensure quality, we need to feel we are always at risk," Shinichi Sasaki, the Toyota executive in charge of quality checks, told reporters. "We should be so worried about our customers we should be having nightmares."

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