Our Point of View: What We Are Doing to Get Back on Track

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by Michael Rouse

There has been a great deal of confusion, speculation and misinformation about our recent recalls – much of it in the media or as a result of unsupported claims about "unintended acceleration" caused by our electronics. We want to set the record straight and tell you the actions we are taking to get back on track.

Update on Recalls

First – regarding our recalls, we are making an all-out effort to address the two specific mechanical causes of unintended acceleration we've identified – the potential for unsecured or incompatible floor mats to trap the accelerator pedal and rare instances of sticking accelerator pedals.

We have rigorously engineered and tested our solutions and they are effective and durable – we are confident that they work. Both fixes are well under way and we are doing everything we can, as fast as we can, to make things right for our customers.

And our dealers continue to make extraordinary efforts to complete the recalls as quickly and conveniently as possible for vehicle owners, with some even staying open 24/7 to get the job done. So far, they've repaired more than one million vehicles for the sticking accelerator pedal recall in just a few weeks and more than half a million vehicles subject to the floor mats recall.

No Flaws Found in our Electronic Systems

Second – regarding our electronic throttle control system, we have sold more than 40 million cars and trucks with ETCS and we're very confident that the system is not the cause of alleged unintended acceleration. Toyota engineers have repeatedly and rigorously tested our ETCS and have never found a single case of unintended acceleration due to a defect in the system.

Three things ensure this absolute reliability. The first is the fail-safe mechanisms we build into the design to shut off or reduce engine power in the event of a failure – and they do work. Second is its tolerance to extreme environmental conditions, including electromagnetic interference. And third is its resistance to software problems.

Toyota takes all complaints of unintended acceleration seriously and will investigate them quickly by deploying teams of engineers and technicians to examine the vehicle and share our findings with safety officials.

We will continue to search for any event in which a failure could occur – even though time and again we have not found that to be the case.

In order to further validate the safety of our ETCS, we have opened our electronics to independent external review in the interests of full transparency.

We also have asked Exponent, a world-class engineering and scientific consulting firm, to conduct its own independent, comprehensive evaluation.

Exponent was unable to induce unintended acceleration in any of the Toyota or Lexus vehicles it investigated in the first phase of its study.

Our new, independent North American Quality Advisory Panel also will evaluate our ETCS and the findings of both studies will be made public.

We're Making Fundamental Changes to be More Responsive

Third – We are making fundamental changes in the way our company operates in order to ensure that Toyota sets an even higher standard for vehicle safety and reliability, responsiveness to customers and transparency with regulators.

At a global level, we have established a Special Committee for Global Quality, led by Toyota's President Akio Toyoda, which will thoroughly review our operations.

We are also putting a system in place to better share important quality and safety information across our global operations and to work more closely and transparently with government agencies, including NHTSA in the United States.

At a regional level, we will ensure that our customers' voices will be heard and acted upon in a timely manner.

We are establishing the new position of Regional Product Safety Executive, and our North American operations will have more autonomy and decision-making power with regard to recall and other safety issues.

We will establish a new Automotive Center of Quality Excellence in the U.S., where a team of our top engineers will focus on strengthening our quality control throughout the region.

And, an independent North American Quality Advisory Panel led by former Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater will advise the company on quality and safety issues.

At the customer level, we are taking significant steps to bolster confidence in the safety and reliability of our vehicles.

Toyota will be one of the first full-line automakers to make brake-override systems standard on all our new models sold in North America by the end of 2010, and our hybrids already have a system that achieves a similar result. We also are installing brake override on seven existing models.

In addition, we are making greater use of event data recorders other improved vehicle diagnostic tools.

Unintended Acceleration is Complex, Beware of a Rush to Judgment

Unintended acceleration is a complex issue of great importance, and rushing to judgment on the basis of unfounded theories – as some media and others have done – is a disservice to the public.

For example, the public and Congress were misled in February by a claim by Professor David Gilbert of Southern Illinois University Carbondale that he had induced unintended acceleration in a Toyota without leaving a trace.

A comprehensive analysis by Exponent and testing by Toyota established that Prof. Gilbert had rewired and reengineered the vehicle's electronics in multiple ways and in a specific sequence under conditions that are virtually impossible to duplicate in the real world.

ABC News dramatized its report of Prof. Gilbert's artificial manipulation using fabricated footage to show an engine speed surge on the tachometer that was actually filmed while the vehicle was standing still. We've asked ABC News to retract the story and issue an apology.

And Sean Kane, an advocate for trial lawyers suing Toyota who financed Prof. Gilbert's work, misleadingly told Congress that the event could only happen in a Toyota.

Mr. Kane was wrong – Exponent and Toyota reproduced the Gilbert experiment in seven other makes of vehicle with broadly similar results.

It's important to note that Mr. Kane has never demonstrated that Toyota's electronics are a cause of unintended acceleration – never.

The case of James Sikes and his "runaway Prius" in March is another example of rushing to judgment without the facts.

Toyota investigators and NHTSA inspectors both examined the vehicle and found that it operates as designed – including its hybrid brake override system.

The vehicle diagnostics we downloaded showed the accelerator and brake pedals had been applied more than 250 times over a very short period.
So the way the event that Mr. Sikes says happened was conveyed through the media is inconsistent with the empirical findings of the investigation.

We Stumbled; We've Learned; We Aim to Set New Standards
We acknowledge that we stumbled with our recent recalls and we have learned the lessons – and now we are working hand-in-hand with our team members, our dealers and our suppliers to make sure that Toyota sets the industry benchmark for safety and quality.

We've been in the business of providing Americans with safe, reliable cars and trucks for 50 years – and that doesn't happen without great quality, outstanding engineering and a robust safety record. And, fully 80 percent of the Toyotas sold in America in the past 20 years are still on the road today.

Many consumers tell us over and again that they believe Toyota has been over-scrutinized and that they remain very confident in the safety our products – as we are.

Our dealers are telling us that customers are coming back and are comfortable with Toyota now that the facts are coming out, and we're also seeing many consumers come in and shop Toyota for the first time.

Actions speak louder than words and we are taking strong actions to get back on track and better serve our customers.
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