

Bearer of Bad News Decides to Advertise It

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Consumer Reports is getting feisty in its old age. After more than 70 years, the magazine has decided that a review isn't enough for a bad product — it deserves a provocative ad campaign, too.

The ads warn against buying extended warranties on new cars, saying, "Pushover on board." They will begin to appear Monday on car-buying Web sites like Caranddriver.com and Edmunds.com, and a full-page version is scheduled to appear Tuesday in USA Today.

The basic message is not new — Consumer Reports, published by the nonprofit group Consumers Union, has said for years that extended warranties on new cars and many other products cost more than they are worth.

But being so confrontational as to pay for advertising in other media, with language that calls a lot of shoppers patsies — that is new. And for the first time, the magazine has data from a survey of 8,000 readers who bought new-car warranties. The survey found that warranty buyers on vehicles from the 2001 and 2002 model years paid an average of \$1,000 and received \$700 worth of repairs in exchange.

Not surprisingly, the car dealers who sell the extended warranties disagree. A spokesman for the National Automobile Dealers Association likened the warranties to insurance for which, of course, policy holders as a group pay more than they get back to protect against the rare problem that is ruinously expensive.

Kenneth Weine, a vice president of Consumers Union, said the ad campaign is a way to further the group's mission, "to make the market a better and safer place for consumers."

Of course, it doesn't hurt if promoting the mission also increases sales. The ads urge consumers to look for more information in Consumer Reports' April issue, the annual review of cars and trucks, which went on sale a week ago.

For most of its history, Consumer Reports did little or no advertising, but the current campaign is the fourth in 16 months, Mr. Weine said. The last one warned against gift cards, which often go unused.

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