

Exec's internal e-mail before Toyota recall: 'We need to come clean'

WASHINGTON (AP) Five days before Toyota Motor Corp. announced a massive recall, a U.S. public relations executive at the automaker warned colleagues in an internal e-mail: "We need to come clean" about accelerator problems, according to documents obtained Wednesday.

"We are not protecting our customers by keeping this quiet," wrote Irv Miller, group vice president for environment and public affairs. "The time to hide on this one is over."

The recently retired Miller wrote the e-mail on Jan. 16 as Toyota officials were on their way to Washington to discuss the problems with federal regulators. On Jan. 21, Toyota announced it would recall 2.3 million vehicles to address sticky pedals in six vehicle models.

The e-mail reveals deep concerns within the company's leadership that Toyota wasn't dealing with the safety problems effectively and could damage the automaker's sterling reputation for producing safe and reliable autos.

The company already had announced a recall of more than 4 million vehicles in the U.S. in late September to replace gas pedals that could get stuck in floor mats and cause sudden acceleration.

The documents show that Toyota's European division, at the same time, told its distributors it was "identifying a production improvement and repair procedure to address complaints by customers in those countries of sticking accelerator pedals, sudden rpm increase and/or sudden vehicle acceleration" not caused by floor mats.

"We better just hope that they can get NHTSA (the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) to work with us in coming (up) with a workable solution that does not put us out of business," Miller wrote.

The e-mail was addressed to Katsuhiko Koganei, executive coordinator for corporate communications for Toyota Motor Sales U.S.A. Inc.

"I hate to break this to you but WE HAVE A tendency for MECHANICAL failure in accelerator pedals of a certain manufacturer on certain models," Miller's e-mail began with several words in capital letters.

In a memo earlier that day, Koganei wrote Mike Michels, vice president of external communications, "Now I talked with you on the phone, we should not mention about the mechanical failures of acc. pedal because we have not clarified the real cause of the sticking acc pedal formally, and the remedy for the matter has not been confirmed."

Koganei further wrote that Toyota executives were concerned news of the mechanical failures "might raise another uneasiness of customers."

The subject line said the e-mail was in regard to a draft statement to respond to an ABC News story.

Toyota, in a statement, said it "does not comment on internal company communications" and declined comment on Miller's e-mail. But the automaker said: "We have publicly acknowledged on several occasions that the company did a poor job of communicating during the period preceding our recent recalls.

Miller, reached by phone at his home in Los Angeles, said he had no comment. His retirement was announced by Toyota on Dec. 16 and his retirement was effective Feb. 1.