

TRANSCRIPT

FOR CHAMBERS, STEINER, MAZUR, ORSTEIN **STATION** WNYW-TV

PROGRAM A CURRENT AFFAIR **CITY** CHICAGO

DATE 09/20/95 06:12PM **AUDIENCE**

SUBJECT CHRYSLER MINI VAN HOTLINE STORY

JON SCOTT, ANCHOR: If you don't own a Chrysler mini van, chances are somebody you know does. They are enormously popular. But after questions arose about the safety of one of the van's key components, Chrysler promised it would take action. How's it going? Well see what you think after you watch this from our investigative reporter, Karl Idsvoog.

ANGELA WOHLDMANN, MARITZ, INC. OPERATOR: Okay sir.. Sir, do you understand that this is not a recall, that they have not found any type of defective work here?

KARL IDSVOOG, REPORTER: What this woman is talking about is one of the most popular family vehicles ever made: the Chrysler mini van. (Visual: Chrysler mini van on road) Chrysler Corporation is doing something absolutely unheard of in automotive history. It is spending millions of dollars to replace the rear door latch on it's 1984 to '95 mini vans it says is not defective. Why would you replace a part when there's nothing wrong with it?

CLARENCE DITLOW, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR AUTO SAFETY: This is one of the most lethal defects that we've seen in auto safety history.

IDSVOOG: Clarence Ditlow (sp?) is Executive Director for the Center for Auto Safety. The Center has been analyzing mini van latch complaints for the past 5 years. (Visual: Ditlow in his office)

DITLOW: There've been at least 41 people killed in ejections from the rear. An average recall doesn't have a single death, let alone 41 deaths. Even the Ford Pinto, which people think of as one of the worst safety defects ever, only had 28 known deaths at the time the government ordered the recall in that case.

IDSVOOG: Last March, the government made a deal with Chrysler Corporation. Chrysler agreed to replace the latches and the government did not order a recall.

P. 2

(Visual: Wohldmann at work in Maritz office) As part of what Chrysler calls, it's 'service action', it hired this St. Charles, Missouri telemarketing firm, Maritz, to set up it's toll-free mini van hotline. (Visual: Maritz, Inc. building) Maritz operators have Chrysler's scripted answers to almost every conceivable question. So when you call with a question, operators read you a carefully prepared response. (Visual: printed document of Chrysler scripted answers seen)

Chrysler says it's all to give its customers peace of mind.

CLIP OF CHRYSLER TV AD: Your concern is our concern..

IDSVOOG: But what's really going on here? With her manager laughing in the background, here's how an operator from the mini van hotline responds to a customer worried about safety. (Visual: Wohldmann on a call at work, Lou Nimnick laughs in background)

WOHLDMANN: Make sure your children are properly seated in the rear seat in the rear seat belts. My name is Angela Wohldmann, W-O-H-L-D-M-A-N-N.

IDSVOOG: Watch and listen to what happens when the caller isn't satisfied with the response and wants to talk with someone else. And by the way, the guy in the background is the top manager of the hotline, Lou Nimnick (sp?). We'll hear from him later.

WOHLDMANN: (talking to customer) I am a supervisor sir. There is nobody above me. (pause for response) Okay, well let me go try to find a supervisor for you, but I.. have to.. (call is ended)

WOHLDMANN: (looking at phone) Dick!

IDSVOOG: Keep in mind, Chrysler set up this hotline to respond to the safety concerns of it's mini vans owners. (Visual: graphic reads 1-800-MINIVAN with Chrysler logo underneath) And with some reports of accidents where the hatch opened upon impact and people flew out the back and were seriously injured or killed, owners may have good reason to be concerned. (Visual: Chrysler mini vans on road, and a damaged mini van)

But that's not what the mini van hotline operators are scripted to say. We repeatedly heard operators tell callers, there was nothing to be concerned about.

FEMALE MARITZ OPERATOR: No, there's no problem with the latch. (Visual: operators in Maritz office)

MALE MARITZ OPERATOR: Let us say, they did find no defect..

IDSVOOG: Some mini van owners told A Current Affair, when they called the hotline, they felt mislead and mistreated. (Visual:

P. 3

Wohldmann walking around smiling smugly)

BRENDA WARE, HOTLINE CALLER: He called me a liar.. He made me feel like I was like, this small.. (Visual: she indicates smallness with fingers)

STUART NIXON, HOTLINE CALLER: The way she put it, it was a nuisance-type problem. And to me, that's not a nuisance; that's a potential hazard.

IDSVOOG: Another person who didn't like what he heard from the mini van hotline, was a man who used to work there.

BRIAN RANDAM: I don't think the American public were getting the straight scoop.

IDSVOOG: He's Brian Randam (sp?) and he wanted the public to know what he learned. (Visual: Brian Randam in parking lot) That's when A Current Affair got involved. We hired him to wear a hidden camera and document what he observed. He had worked on Maritz's projects for 7 weeks and his last 2 days, recorded what happens when customers called. (Visual: more Maritz operators; Bill Sissler and children in his mini van) Customers like Bill Sissler (sp?) of Winchester, Maryland, who hauls his kids everywhere in his mini van.

BILL SISSLER, PARENT: We're in it practically every day. I don't want an accident to occur like it has happened to other people.

IDSVOOG: Sissler's had no problems with the latch on his van and he wants to make sure he never does. So he called the hotline.

SISSLER: I was not very satisfied with the answer and I asked for, you know, to speak with someone else.

MALE MARITZ OPERATOR: Do you want me to hand you over to my supervisor now sir? (Visual: inside Maritz office)

IDSVOOG: Did you ever wonder what happens when you ask to speak to someone's supervisor? Well here's what happened with Bill Sissler's call. The operator tells the supervisor an upset customer wants to talk. (Visual: a supervisor is standing next to operator on phone with Sissler)

MALE OPERATOR: You want to talk to him Lou? Or do you want me to get his name and number?

MARITZ SUPERVISOR OPERATOR: Get his name and number, 'cause I'm about to go to lunch.

IDSVOOG: With one supervisor heading to lunch, our man seeks out another.

P. 4

WOHLDMANN: This guy can stew for a minute..

IDSVOOG: After letting him stew, the call gets passed to Lou Nimnick. He's the guy you saw laughing before. He tells Bill Sissler there's nothing wrong with his van.

LOU NIMNICK, HEAD SUPERVISOR OF MARITZ: The latch on your vehicle is safe.

IDSVOOG: But just listen to what he says the next day..

NIMNICK: They certainly could have built a better latch, to start with. There's no question; they built a helluva van.. However if you look at it, it is the safest car (censored word) on the road, as a class, which means that, if you're gonna analyze it, even though Chrysler could have done a better job on their latches there's a (garbled word) and a few people killed that wouldn't be.. There's no question.. There's probably been.. as many as 20 or 30 or 50 people who were killed in the mini van or severely screwed up when there would have only been maybe five or so..

IDSVOOG: One thing to keep in mind: A manager of a consumer hotline is not a safety engineer. (Visual: Nimnitz and Wohldmann) So when the manager tells an employee people have died because of a problem with the latch, that's simply his opinion.. not Chrysler's.

Although the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, NHTSA, has not officially declared the mini van latch defective, a top NHTSA official told A Current Affair just 2 weeks ago, "The bottom line is, there's a safety problem." When we told that official the mini van hotline was telling customers the government found no problems with the latch? He disagreed, telling us, "That infers we gave Chrysler a clean bill of health. That is certainly not the case."

The government's auto safety experts refused to be interviewed on camera for our story. (Visual: government building, Chrysler TV commercial) So did Chrysler executives. Chrysler told us, it would answer absolutely no questions from A Current Affair. One person who was able to get candid comments was our man on the inside. Listen to what the head of the mini van hotline said about customers' safety concerns when he wasn't reading the Chrysler script. (Visual: Lou Nimnitz in Maritz office)

NIMNICK: Why do they keep these damn, unsafe, terrible, horrible latch.. screwed up latch mini vans? If they're so concerned about their children? And I'm serious. If it's that much of a (censored word).. If it really is that big of a deal, why don't they take the damn Caravan and go and trade it in for a new Windstar or whatever..

P. 5

IDSVOOG: I think it's time Chrysler took a look at the operation of it's hotline as well as it's tailgate latches.

[End]