

There's 'lemon' aid for car buyers

By Tim Richard
staff writer

"There's no incentive for a car dealer to settle with you if you have a 'lemon' or a warranty problem," says former lemon owner Chris Andrews.

His new line of work is to help lemon owners give auto dealers that incentive. From his Southfield home, Andrews runs a non-profit group called Aid for Lemon Owners (ALO), teaching clients how to persuade dealers to give them satisfaction.

The client learns from Andrews' experience. It was bitter experience.

"TWO YEARS AGO I bought a new car and had problems from the day one," he said. "Three months out of the six I had it, it was in the shop — and I was making payments."

"I was with Century Insurance. When you're in sales and don't have a car, you lose sales, your productivity goes down, and you lose a job."

On one of his trips to the dealer, Andrews recalled, he asked for all the work orders on his car. "They inadvertently gave me the work orders done on the car before I bought it," he said. Those work orders showed his lemon had had \$600 worth of body work, two or three coats of paint on different parts of the body and different locks.

And yet it had been sold to him as a new car.

He went to the state attorney general, the secretary of state and other agencies without success before concluding: "There's no place to contact."

Andrews' lawsuit was settled out of court two months ago. He figures he's still \$3,000 behind.

LAST JANUARY he formed ALO, essentially to give others what-to-do information which took him many months and several thousands of dollars to accumulate.

Four or five part-time persons field phone calls (552-8888) and mail out information (from Box 681 Southfield 48037 — they have no office).

ALO takes down the caller's complaints, then sends appropriate packets of information for \$25 plus postage, COD.

The packet contains pamphlets from state government, consumer groups, federal agencies.

There is a similar agency in California and Ralph Nader's Center for Auto Safety but nothing in between, so ALO gets calls from other Midwestern states.

"It gets busier and busier," said Andrews, who has handled about 120 new

car complaints plus uncounted numbers of warranty of used car complaints. "If I had had all that information two years ago, I would have got it (his money) back in two weeks."

He has no statistics on what percentage of his customers are ultimately successful because not all report back. But there are success stories.

WHAT DO YOU do once you have a packet?

"First, you write a letter to the dealer. There's a sample letter of complaint."

"If you don't get a response, there's a list of 33 agencies to which you can send copies. You might as well let the dealer know you're telling the whole world."

Andrews calculates that once the dealer sees the customer knows what to do and is willing to do it, the dealer will settle in order to avoid the hassle. That is the dealer's incentive. War stories:

• A man who bought a used car for \$4,000 was told two weeks later it needed \$1,000 worth of work. The mileage on the car hadn't been noted at the time of sale — a violation of state law by the dealer. Three telephone calls later, the man got his purchase price back.

• A mother and daughter purchased a new car late one afternoon, but a different car was delivered to them next day. The dealer made a correction.

• A man spent \$20,000 on a new car and in 18 months took it back to the dealer 30 times for the same problem — oil leaks. The dealer offered him \$10,000 to settle. The man painted a lemon sign on his car and parked it near the dealership. His final settlement was the purchase price minus depreciation — considerably better than the first \$10,000 offer.

IF THESE methods don't work, Andrews advises taking the case to arbitration. All car companies have arbitration systems.

His information kit tells the lemon owner how to prepare the complaint. "You have to know what you want, you have to tell them why you want it, you have to prove it — so save all the work orders — and you have to know what you're asking for."

"You need to prepare your case. We find most people are successful at arbitration. The company says, 'These people are serious.'"

If arbitration fails, ALO will refer the customer to an attorney who specializes in lemon cases.

"We're not attorneys and don't pro-

fect to be," Andrews said. "It's knowing where to go and what to do."

IN THE FALL, Andrews will be stalking the corridors of Lansing to seek introduction and passage of a bill similar to a California "lemon law" protecting car owners. He will use 105 cases to demonstrate that people would have had their money refunded or a replacement car if Michigan had a similar law.

The gist: "If you brought your car in four separate times for a problem and it can't be fixed, or if your car is out of service a total of 30 calendar days during the first 12 months or 12,000 (miles), you're entitled to your money back."

Other states such as Connecticut, New Jersey and Florida have passed such laws, and Andrews expects still others to follow suit, but admits:

"It's going to be tougher here 'cause this is the car capital of the U.S.A."



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