By area consumer group

Auto dealers' Lansing lobbying rapped

By CARL STODDARD

A Southfield-based consumers group criticized an auto dealers association for tinkering with a law designed to protect car owners from questionable practices at car service facilities.

Doug Ross, co-director of Michigan Citizens Lobby (MCL), 15800 Ten Mile Road in Southfield, claimed large dealerships are lobbying in Lansing to "gut the law and rob area car owners of the protection they fought so hard to get.'"

He made his remarks during a press conference Friday at Arie's Texaco, 24800 Evergreen Road, Southfield.

During an interview later, Ross said the MCL urged creation of a bill requiring auto service repair facilities to register with the Secretary of State's office and agree to certain guidelines. That act was approved by the Legislature and goes into effect March 1.

THE MICHIGAN Automobile Dealers Association (MADA) is now backing a bill which would restruct the act to repair fees in excess of $50, Ross said. Such an ammendment, if passed, would severely limit the effectiveness of the bill, he said.

According to a study conducted by the MCL, the average car repair bill in Michigan is $45.

Gordon Wilson, president of MADA, could not be reached to comment on the MCL charges Friday at his dealership in Detroit. MADA offices in East Lansing were closed.

Walter Czarnecki, owner of Roger Penske Chevrolet, Southfield, said he isn't sure why MADA is seeking to establish a $50 minimum requirement but suggested it may have been proposed as a means of reducing the "voluminous paperwork" which will be generated by the new law. He added that he personally favors the law.

"In my opinion," he said, "the law is a long time coming."

Under provisions of the car repair law, car owners must be given a written estimate by an auto repair shop prior to any repairs. That estimate may not be exceeded without the permission of the car owner.

In addition, the repair shop must return all parts which were replaced. And, after repairs are complete, the service facility must provide a detailed statement listing what was wrong with the car, what repairs were requested, what repairs were completed and who did the repairs.

THE LAW empowers the Secretary of State's office to handle and resolve customer complaints, Ross said, and may order return of part or all of the money a customer has paid or order that additional repairs be done at no cost to the customer.

The law also requires mechanics to be licensed in specific areas of repair, Ross said.

To insure that repair facilities will be able to refund money if necessary, one section of the law requires all facilities to obtain a $10,000 surety bond. Ross said it was later determined that the cost of the bond might hurt smaller repair shops. An ammendment was passed by the Michigan Senate and sent to the House which would eliminate that section of the law, Ross said.

It was that ammendment to which the MADA has now attempted to add a provision limiting the extent of the law to repairs exceeding $50, he said.

According to Ross, the Governor's office and the State Attorney General's office are both opposing the ammendment as it now stands.

The ammendment is in a House committee and expected to come before the House when it reconvenes Jan. 13.

Robert Johnson, president of Market Research Group in Farmington Hills, defends legitimate use of the telephone by market research organizations who use the telephone to conduct surveys. (Staff photo by Stephen Cantrell)

Rrrring: survey or pitch?

By RON GARBINSKI

It's about 7 p.m. and, after finishing dinner, you are ready to settle into a comfortable easy chair with your favorite newspaper when the telephone rings.

After explaining that he is conducting a survey, the caller begins to ask several questions. How can you be sure he is taking an actual market research survey or if he is just using the telephone approach under the pretense of later selling a product?

"Companies using the telephone for sales soliciting under the guise of market research have become a big problem for firms whose business it is to conduct market research surveys. We take surveys to collect advanced data and consumer response to new products for manufacturers," says Robert Johnson, president of Market Research Group in Farmington Hills.

"MANY OTHER FIRMS say they are taking a survey and use the telephone as a means of finding possible buyers for their products. Once the initial contact is made, someone else usually will call that person and try to sell a product," he explains.

"But market research companies don't ever make sales follow-up calls. We are only interested in sampling consumers and finding out their response to advanced, new products. We guarantee their anonymity and never reveal names or phone numbers to other firms.

"But many times, firms trying to make a sale follow-up their calls with a sales pitch or come-on a few days later. A lot of people get upset at this approach and naturally complain to us because we are a market research company," he continues.

"Then when we try to make calls and conduct our surveys, many people won't talk to us because they fear a sales follow-up or are concerned about their privacy."

Johnson says this really has an effect on research firms because when people don't respond to market research surveys, some of the random sampling benefits of a national survey are lost.

A growing number of people don't want to be interviewed, and this is a problem companies like Johnson's are experiencing nationwide. He says the reason for this is the abuse of the telephone surveying method.

"People should know it is in their best interest to respond to market research surveys because manufacturers are keenly interested in knowing if people will respond to their new products. If buyers don't respond to surveys, manufacturers then might have a more difficult time gauging the probable success of a new product," he says.

Johnson offers a few suggestions that might help the consumer tell if the caller is conducting an actual market research survey or if he is using the call to set up a sales pitch.

SEVERAL THINGS one might check are whether the calller introduces himself, gives the company's name, location and purpose in making the survey.

"One of the key things in most market research surveys is that, after telling the interviewee our purpose, we let them know we are not selling a product nor will the person be contacted later with ads, promotions or sales follow-ups," Johnson explains.

"This should be said at the outset of the interview. If not, then there might be some come-on or gimmick," he says.

Most research surveys start off like this. They are kept short, interesting and reassure the person that it's important to get consumer feedback.

Johnson says if the consumer suspects anything, he can ask for a telephone number and call them back. "But sometimes this doesn't always work because you have no real proof that they actually are who they say they are."

If a consumer suspects something fishy, he can always report the call to the Better Business Bureau. A specific name or address would be helpful, too, but be wary of whom you talk to over the phone, he says.

"This is not a fool-proof method and there is no guarantee that it will work. But at least it is one way to find out who is interviewing you and helps put you on guard next time you receive a call," he explains.

"It is important for people to realize the difference between the market research survey and telephone soliciting because surveys are a vital marketing tool. Since so many firms are using the method fraudulently and are deceiving the public, consumers must do something about it by at least passing the call onto the Better Business Bureau.

"Since the phone is one of our most efficient tools in surveying, we must keep consumers informed and change this growing lack of confidence in consumer research surveys," Johnson concludes.

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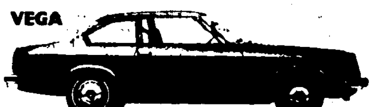

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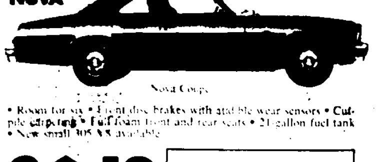

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