

Retired analyst defends buying American

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

It's easy to picture Ray Windecker as an automotive Don Quixote, riding into battle with a hubcap for a shield and a briefcase full of statistics as his weapon.

Think American automobiles are vastly inferior to those made in Japan? Windecker will hit you with a Florida "lemon index" showing fewer claims against GM cars than any other model.

Then, he'll whip out another survey showing 1.54 complaints from every 100 Pontiac owners compared with a near-equal 1.6 from those who own a Nissan.

Since retiring 2 1/2 years ago as a Ford Motor Co. research analyst, Windecker has waged a one-man campaign in defense of U.S. automobiles.

OCC offers 6 months pay to senior faculty members

Hoping to trim operating expenses, Oakland Community College is offering an early buy-out to administrators and faculty members nearing retirement.

A package approved by the OCC board of trustees last week offers half a year's salary to anyone with 15 years or more of service. About 300 of OCC's 800 full-time employees are eligible, according to spokesman George Carlsons.

This is the second time OCC has offered early retirement as an option. The other time was in 1982 when, not coincidentally, Michigan and OCC also faced a bleak economy.

OCC Chancellor Patsy J. Fulton

bles from his Livonia home. From a newly-made office, he runs American Autodata — an information service billed among the world's most accurate when it comes to auto specifics.

"I had the extra room and I thought, why not," he said.

Since then, he's written columns for various newspapers and automotive publications — and woe be to any reporter whose research is less painstaking than Windecker's own.

"HE'S THE kind of guy who'll call up a newspaper reporter and call him an S.O.B. right over the phone," automotive columnist Dan McCosh said. "But as far as his own figures, I've never had any problem with them."

Windecker takes pride and no small pleasure in his reputation as a debunker.

"He's a real 'iconoclast,'" said

McCosh, who has known Windecker for more than a decade. "His statistics always go against the grain of what is being accepted as common knowledge."

Once, that meant refuting claims of rival U.S. automakers. Today, that means attacking whole-hearted acceptance of Japanese automotive superiority.

Satisfied Honda, Toyota and Nissan drivers may scoff, but Windecker's basic premise is that U.S. automakers — while hardly perfect — can compete if only given the chance.

Nearly 15 years ago, Windecker compiled a detailed history of the Japanese market, showing, he said, how that nation's automakers built their markets at foreigners' expense.

The 1990s exclusion of GM and Ford from a once-viable Japanese market, he argued, cost U.S. automakers the chance to learn from Japanese breakthroughs even though pre- and post-war Japanese automakers toured U.S. plants freely.

"I sent it to dozens of newspapers and only one, the Toledo Blade, expressed any interest at all," he recalled.

Today, Windecker is getting more media attention — he recently wrote an editorial page opinion piece for the Detroit News — but he worries the battle may already be lost.

"ALL THIS Buy American stuff, it will fade," he said. "That's because most Americans are economically illiterate. This isn't just about the automotive business but about business period."

Economic literacy — at least according to Windecker — stems from

an understanding that foreign-made "bargains" actually rob the domestic economy.

"For every \$10,000 you buy from a non-reciprocal country, it costs U.S. taxpayers \$3,000," Windecker said, citing balance of trade figures, declining domestic operations and, ultimately higher property taxes to cover their loss.

The key is opening the Japanese market to U.S. goods, though Windecker said President Bush's recent trip did little to bring that about.

"Don't listen to George Bush, listen to what the Japanese are saying," he said.

While some might doubt his figures, or call him a Japan-basher, there is little doubt Windecker practices what he preaches.

His home computer isn't Japanese-made, nor are the eyeglasses he wears.

"There may be only two U.S. frames in the store, compared with 200 frames from Taiwan and every place else," he said. "But I'll buy the American pair."

Automobiles have been his life. Starting as a mechanic, Windecker has risen from auto salesman to marketing official to corporate spokesman, serving Hudson, Studebaker and Ford — and butting heads with countless other opinion makers — along the way.

Though a Ford Aerostar van is his current transportation, Windecker is also lovingly restoring a 1953 Studebaker, while his cherished 1968 Mustang is saved for good-weather-only driving.

Though an iconoclast, he isn't exactly an outsider.



JIM JAGGELD/staff photographer

A self-described "debunker," Ray Windecker of Livonia has been studying the domestic and Japanese auto markets for years, issuing position papers often at odds with prevailing industry thought.

"When he was at Ford, it was my impression he was very much an insider, very much in the loop," McCosh said.

But why keep fighting now? With a large portion of the domestic market share lost, seemingly forever, and Japanese markets difficult, if not impossible, to open, why not retire to a less stressful life of gardening or golfing? Married 42 years, and with two adult sons, maybe it's

time to slow down.

Windecker considers the question. "I know my doctor wants me to slow down. I've got ulcers and, sometimes, I can't sleep thinking about the auto industry," he said.

"But if I've talked a thousand people out of buying an imported product, or saved 20 U.S. jobs, then I've done all right."

"This isn't just about me, but my children and my grandchildren, too."

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