

MenuFax from page 1C

Early marketing research predicts establishments that use MenuFax can expect a customer increase as high as 15 percent.

Restaurants and takeouts sign on for \$39 a month, she said. For that, they are permitted regular menu changes to keep current. The ability to change the menu, Reed said, is perhaps MenuFax's biggest enticement.

"Let's say you have a special or a coupon you want to add — call us in the morning and we can make the change in time for lunch," she said.

Reed said MenuFax is also toy-ing with the idea of a membership card that would identify people who call up the service. "If (res-taurants and takeouts) agree."

Vince Bland, general manager for Alban's in Birmingham, said he thinks the service is a great idea.

"The possibilities are endless," Bland said he is always inter-ested in new marketing ideas. "You have to be aggressive — we have to be to keep up with trends or we'll be left by the side of the road."

It is not uncommon for people to call and ask employees to read

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Vince Bland
Alban's general manager

the menu. "This should cut down on the time we spend on the phone."

Who knows how many people call each day and get a busy signal and go somewhere else, he said.

Bland said his menu is fairly consistent, but he likes the idea of being able to call in the morning with changes and have them in effect by lunch. In addition to coupons, Alban's also plans to include order sheets with its menus to help larger groups plan lunch.

Bland said he believes the service will not only encourage cur-rent customers to use Alban's more, but will result in new cus-tomers. "We hope it will increase the range from which we draw."

GM liability ramifications extensive



DAN MCCOSH

AUTO TALK

GM's Harry J. Pearce took up lance in hand last week and trundled off to attack the windmills in Washington once again.

General Motors' vice president and general counsel, Pearce, of Bloomfield Hills, launched himself into the public spotlight a few months ago with an emotion-charged exposé of NBC's badly handled reporting on the alleged deficiencies of the gas tanks on old GM pickup trucks.

Surprisingly, that unseated the entire administration of NBC news and for one brief moment put GM in the unlikely position of being perceived as a victim in the public eye — a necessary element of getting the public's sympathy these days.

Now he's taking on a more difficult task using some logic to defend GM's most popular vehicle against charges coming from, among others, the Center

for Auto Safety, the Washington agency that wrote the book on victimhood.

The merits of the case at hand are relatively simple, albeit mainly badly misreported.

Accused are the approximately 4.6 million pickups built between 1973 and 1987 designed with a frame that surrounded the drive shaft, a design that meant the gas tank would be mounted well forward and outside the frame rail under the pickup bed.

The charge is that this is a location prone to fires when the truck is hit in the side (although by the same logic, it should be safer when rear-ended). The argument swayed an Indiana jury, which awarded some \$100 million to the family of a teenager who died after his pickup was hit by a drunken driver at some 70 mph.

The National Highway Traffic Administration, which once defended the gas tank design, now is asking GM to recall the trucks.

It goes without saying there is a lot of money at stake — hun-

dreds of millions waiting in attorney contingency fees if the Center for Auto Safety prevails, and the potential cost of the largest recall in history, estimated at about \$1 billion, if GM loses.

Somewhat lost in the debate is the potential safety hazard to the public.

Even using the worst-case numbers issued by GM's critics, the accident rate for a side-impact fire is less than one death for every billion miles or so racked up. Chevy and GMC pickups of this vintage — making them statistically one of the safest vehicles on the road.

Money aside, the majority of the auto engineering community is solidly on GM's side, because it sees the defense of this case as a defense of some basic engineering principles that are essential to making any product perform well.

The most important is engineering to a basic set of standards, rather than an arbitrary goal set retroactively to apply to vehicles already two decades old. By rejecting basic engineering methodology, this kind of re-

call sets a precedent that greatly expands the notion of product liability, stretching the bounds of common sense.

Of course the real irony is that even if GM loses, and is forced to recall these trucks, there is no way to "fix" them anyway. The gas tank and frame are such a basic part of the design, that any slapsdash shield or plate — as has been suggested by the Center for Auto Safety — would be merely a psychological improvement, the same way they "fixed" the Pinto.

On the other hand, maybe an imaginary fix to a nonexistent ailment would be appropriate — along with paying for the whole mess with play money.

Dan McCosh is automotive editor of Popular Science magazine. If you have a comment, question or suggestion concerning Auto Talk, write to Dan McCosh, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, 48150, or you can call him directly by dialing 953-2047, mail box number 1870, on a touch-tone phone.

DATEBOOK

■ DMAD
Don Zelsbach, managing director of Credit Card Operations at General Motors Corp., will address the monthly meeting of the Direct Marketing Association of Detroit on Thursday, May 6. Call 268-8803.

■ CPA, ATTORNEY
The Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants and the Taxation Section of the State Bar of Michigan are presenting their annual CPA/Attorney Conference at 8 a.m., Friday, May 7, at the Grand Manor at Fairlane. Call 855-2288 for reservations.

■ OCBC
Ronald E. Hall of MMBDC will speak on the goals and missions of the Michigan Minority Business Development Council on Saturday, May 8, at the Oakland County Business Consortium at the Northland Mall auditorium at 10 a.m.

■ MPWN
Judith Miller, appointed by Governor John Engler as Michigan Business Ombudsman will speak to MPWN about being a woman small business owner in Michigan on Monday, May 5 at 6 p.m.. Call 377-1800, ext. 219.

■ INSURANCE LAW
The impact of recent insurance related legal decisions and developments on industry professionals and attorneys will be the focus of a Wednesday, May 12 seminar presented by Kaufman & Payton, a Farmington Hills based law firm. The seminar will take place at the Plaza Hotel in Southfield from 1:30 - 5 p.m. Call (716) 833-3940 for reservations.

■ RETAIL FORECAST
The impact on retailers of "Climatonomics" will be featured topic of discussion at a retail executive forum, presented by Coopers &

Lybrand's National Retail and Distribution Industries Group, at the Townsend Hotel in Birmingham on Wednesday, May 12 from 8:30-10:30 a.m. Call 396-6824.

■ TAX PLANNING
The Michigan Association of Certified Public Accountants is presenting a financial and tax planning conference for Thursday, May 13 at the MSU Management Education Center in Troy beginning at 8 a.m.. Call 855-2288 for details.

■ PEAK PERFORMANCE
The Business/Professional Advertising Association of Detroit is featuring Mike Wickett of Wickett Corporate Training International at its Thursday, May 13, luncheon meeting at the Somerset Inn in Troy. Call 851-9095 for reservations.

■ CAREER WOMEN
The National Association of Career Women - Metro Detroit chapter welcomes Greg Winterhalter, owner of Strategic Seminars and Strategic Micro Planning, as it's

speaker at the Thursday, May 13 luncheon at the Steak & Ale at 12 Mile and Orchard Lake roads. He will speak on "Empowering Yourself to Peak Performance." Call 360-2035.

■ WRITE US
To have your upcoming item inserted in this calendar, write the datebook calendar, business editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia MI 48150 or have the item dropped off at any of the Observer or Eccentric offices.

■ INVENTORY MANAGEMENT
Accurate management inventory, critical for a successful business, will be the focus of a seminar on Friday, May 7 at Oakland University beginning at 8 a.m. call 370-3120.

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