

Recall, TSB or customer service campaign: What's the difference?

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If that new vehicle you bought recently has intermittent electrical issues, a sluggish transmission, a squeak from the dashboard or some other issue, chances are you aren't the only one experiencing these problems.

If others are having the same problems with the same vehicle, chances also are good that the vehicle manufacturer has heard about them and – cross your fingers – sent what is known as a technical service bulletin to its dealers that prescribes a remedy for fixing them.

Technical service bulletins (TSBs) can cover all manner of issues, such as wind noise, water leaks, a loose suspension bracket, programming glitches that trigger a check engine light or a bad resistor that disables the cooling fan.

Unlike with safety recalls, manufacturers aren't required to notify vehicle owners of TSBs. Instead, they send the notices to dealers to address complaints from owners that something doesn't work properly. That means it's up to the vehicle owner to bring their vehicle to a dealership to initiate a repair.

A "customer service campaign" can also be referred to as a "secret warranty" because in some cases the only ones who find out about them are those that complain to dealers.

A "customer service campaign" doesn't conform to NHTSA notification rules. The problem is not considered to be a safety issue, and the automaker issues one to address complaints and keep the customer happy, according to Consumer Reports. Service campaigns often cover widespread problems that occur after the warranty expires.

In terms of severity of safety risk, a customer service campaign is the least problematic; a TSB is reported to NHTSA but not necessarily to car owners and typically cover a new car quirk; a recall is a safety defect that must be fixed and customers must be notified.

Earlier this week, Consumer Reports urged Toyota to upgrade its customer service campaign for power brake defects in 2007 to 2011 Camry Hybrids to a recall. The campaign was a response to consumer complaints being investigated by the NHTSA.

In some cases, manufacturers do notify owners of TSBs and service campaigns. Nissan, for example, informed buyers of 2013 Altima sedans and Pathfinder SUVs that a belt in the continuously variable automatic transmission could slip and damage the transmission. Nissan encouraged owners to bring their vehicle to a dealer to reprogram the transmission's electronic controls at no charge.

Consumers can find a list of TSBs for their vehicle online at the same site where the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration posts safety recalls.

Manufacturers typically issue more TSBs in the first model year of a new or redesigned vehicle when, despite extensive pre-production testing, they discover design, engineering and manufacturing flaws after

the vehicles are exposed to the ultimate test – being driven in the real world. The number of TSBs usually falls in the second year and often continues to decline in subsequent years.

When the Altima, for example, was redesigned for the 2013 model year, Nissan issued 24 TSBs for the new sedan. So far for the 2014 Altima, only four have been issued. The Ford Escape SUV also was redesigned for 2013, and Ford issued 39 TSBs for that year but only 22 so far for 2014 models.

Repairs or adjustments covered by TSBs are done at no cost to the vehicle owner and usually can be performed as long as the vehicle is still covered by the basic warranty. Some TSBs or service campaigns may have time limits.

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