



# What does 'Buy American' really mean to potential car buyers?

By ANN JOB  
The Associated Press

Government-mandated labels on new cars and trucks that detail American content appear to have done little to create widespread "Buy American" loyalties or halt growing sales of vehicles from foreign automakers.

Japan-based automakers sales have risen 27.5 percent, sales of Korean vehicles have grown 364 percent and German automaker's sales have increased 196 percent.

Total sales of the traditional Detroit-based Big Three brands — excluding vehicles they acquired by buying into off-shore-based carmakers — fell 4 percent in between 1995 and 2002, a sales analysis shows.

"Consumer research indicates that for a lot of people (the Buy

American issue) really doesn't come up," said George Peterson, president of the automotive research firm, AutoPacific Inc. of Tustin, Calif. "They buy what they want to buy."

Peterson noted it's especially true of younger buyers who don't have the same strong feelings about buying American as do older buyers.

"They're more open," he said, adding that many young people are employed in services, rather than in manufacturing.

"As a result, they're not tied to the union jobs of old and don't have the same sensitivities as did earlier generations," Peterson said.

Dan Bonawitz, vice president of corporate planning and logistics at American Honda, also has seen little evidence that the labels impact sales.

An evaluation two years ago by the National Highway

Traffic Safety Administration found much the same thing.

In a survey of 646 people, just 5 percent said they were influenced by the label to any degree whatsoever, NHTSA said.

Even among consumers who described themselves as Buy American advocates, just 20 percent said they knew of the so-called content labels and only 9 percent had read one at a dealership.

The labels were mandated after the U.S. Congress, at the urging of the United Auto Workers union and Detroit's Big Three, passed the American Automobile Labeling Act (AALA) of 1992.

It required automakers to formulate and post on every new model the origin of the vehicle's parts and the vehicle's assembly site.

The AALA took effect with vehicles manufactured after

Oct. 1, 1994.

One car can have as many as 20,000 parts. Bonawitz said to certify and analyze the content of each model, there's a staff just to keep track of all that stuff.

Still, no one seems hellbent on getting rid of the labels.

"That's not even on our radar screens, it's not on our lobbying agenda," said Ellen Dickson, who's the policy public affairs person at Ford Motor Co.

Heidi Blumenthal, director of the legislative affairs for the American International Automobile Dealers Association, which represents 5,000 dealers, said while gathering the content information can be costly, it's not a front-burner issue in the auto industry right now.

She said consumers don't care about content anymore because they have seen in recent years

how the auto industry has become global.

For example, Chrysler vehicles today are products of German-based DaimlerChrysler, and Ford Motor Co.'s portfolio of vehicles includes English-built Jaguars and Land Rovers.

Honda, Toyota, Nissan, Mitsubishi, BMW and Mercedes-Benz now build vehicles in the United States, and more factories are planned.

"They don't care anymore about 'Buy American' loyalties," she added. "They want to buy the best."

Peterson agreed, saying people tend to buy based on whether they like the looks of a new model, whether it's affordable and has perceived value, has features that fit their needs, is safe and, in their opinion, will be a durable performer.

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