

ENCOUNTER: MICHAEL DULBERGER

Knowing The Score

Avon Engineer's Vehicle Rating System Blends Safety Agencies' Data In Fresh Way

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In early 1991, Michael Dulberger was looking for a new car - one with a safe back seat. He had recently become a volunteer for Big Brothers and needed a car to transport his new 6-year-old friend. So he began to research automotive safety ratings.

For Dulberger, the research provided more questions than answers, ultimately leading the structural engineer to found Informed for Life Inc., a nonprofit Internet resource for car buyers.

Dulberger, 62, of Avon, now retired from Pratt & Whitney, owns several other small businesses, but says he spends at least half of his time analyzing car safety data and applying his own weighting system, yielding a "statistical combination of risk elements," or SCORE, for each vehicle he studies.

Dulberger is a member of the Society of Automotive Engineers, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, and the Association for the Advancement for Automotive Medicine. The Informed For Life website is at <http://www.informedforlife.org/>.

Q. Consumers typically rely on two official sources for data on car safety: the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Are you saying that their data are flawed?

A. Rather than use the word "flawed," I would say that their data are incomplete. Specifically, NHTSA now requires, starting in 2007, that the information they derive from crash testing be posted on the window stickers in the form of a star rating system, with a ranking from one to five stars. When I looked very carefully at this system, I was quite shocked at how misleading this rating can be. The system we're using basically consists of four and five stars because 97 percent of all the 2007 vehicles rated received either four or five stars for frontal collisions. In fact, three-quarters of the vehicles received five stars. People looking at that are going to believe that they are looking at a safe vehicle, but everybody in the class got an A!

The number of people who die every year in automobile accidents is approximately 43,000 in this country alone, and 38 percent of those are a result of front-end collisions.

Every day, the average number of these fatalities is 119 people. It's like a major airline crashing every day. Yet we ignore it and accept it.

Q. You've said that the safety ratings of NHTSA and IIHS can be inconsistent with regard to the same car. How does this happen, and why do say that your SCORE is a better indicator?

A. The most common example of inconsistent crash-test ratings between the agencies occurs with side-impact testing. A primary reason for this is the failure by NHTSA to account for head trauma during side-impact testing, whereas IIHS does. For model-year 2006 there were 15 examples of

vehicles rated five stars for side impact by NHTSA and yet received the lowest possible rating - poor - by IIHS, including the Mercury Mariner and Volkswagen New Beetle.

Only by combining all of the ratings by NHTSA and IIHS on a fatality-weighted basis can you arrive at a meaningful measure of overall safety. The risk index SCORE combines these crash test ratings, rollover resistance, vehicle weight and critical safety equipment to arrive at a single value for each vehicle's inherent risk level.

Q. Aren't demographics and consumer choice important variables in safety? For instance, is a particular make and model more likely to be driven faster or without seat belts?

A. It's difficult to pull demographic data out of the [published] data. I've done it in reverse.

I pull out that which I can quantify and combine those components into a single SCORE number. I see that it correlates with 47 percent of this large variation in death rate between vehicles. Therefore I can approximate that the balance, 53 percent, could very well be due to demographics. That's important, but it also says that one half of the death and injury rate is controllable, to a great extent, by selecting vehicle A over vehicle B.

Q. Your work has been discussed in Forbes, Motor Trend and on National Public Radio. U.S. News and World Report says that you are "filling a gap in the availability of straightforward crash ratings." How many people actually use this website?

A. I get about 6,000 hits a day. I'm pleased with that, but it's not really enough. I need to reach more. Other websites are now linking to mine, such as Car Talk and Car-Safety.org.

Q. Have car manufacturers contacted you with data and information? If so, how do you maintain neutrality?

A. I have been contacted by one manufacturer - Honda. They did it very cautiously. They wanted to pique my interest in an analysis they did that indicated that weight was not important when it came to vehicle safety. I looked at their data and found some elements that I'd be curious to pursue, but I replied to them that I only use validated data from NHTSA and IIHS.

I don't accept any advertising or donations.

Q. What are you driving these days?

A. I won't tell you because I don't want anyone to think I have an ulterior motive other than providing good information. It is, though, on my website's list of the top 10 percent of safe vehicles.

Jennifer Warner Cooper is a free-lance writer from Glastonbury.

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