

Eco-energetic labeling of vehicles and their motivational programs

In today's context of growing environmental preoccupation and great efforts to reduce our dependence on oil, authorities have been trying to birth programs and different measures (financial and other) that would aim at sensitizing consumers, or at least leading them to make more responsible decisions when it comes to energy efficiency of vehicles.

Are consumers informed well enough when comes the time to buy a vehicle that would meet environmental preoccupations? What resources can they rely on to aid them with their choice? Is the current labeling system actually going to help consumers take environmental and energetic data into consideration?

Risks of global warming have been officially acknowledged for about ten years. Governments have tried to get citizens to act individually to positively influence the mass production of greenhouse gases. The results, however, remain mitigated, as shown by the One-Ton Challenge.

Our study shows that, despite the theoretic models elaborated by economists, the consumer's behavior when purchasing an automobile, as well as when they use it, falls short of being rational. Our culture, our urban lifestyle, our economy and our perception have been altered by the automotive industry and its marketing for at least two generations.

The automotive industry already has the technological solutions on hand that would let Canadian automobilists profit from vehicles with superior eco-energetic performance. The technological advancements of the last few years have however been mostly seen in the weight and power of the vehicles, rather than in a better energy efficiency. In order to try to make manufacturers produce more efficient vehicles, the last federal budget put a rebate in place for certain less energy consuming vehicles, as well as a « Green Levy » on fuel-inefficient vehicles. Certain provinces offer a sales tax rebate on efficient models and an annual registration surtax on more energy-consuming models.

The public's expectations probably still remain too unclear to impose a vehicle offer-modification to the industry. Parallel to the motivational or punitive programs put in place by the government, the consumers must be informed, in a way impossible to circumvent, about certain facts concerning energy efficiency of vehicles and their impact on the environment (and their wallet). Also, they must, starting immediately, be « deprogrammed » to trigger a reevaluation of their values and behaviors concerning automobiles, therefore countering the way automotive advertising changed our perception (individually and collectively) of individual transportation.

Using a labeling system created for this purpose, the consumer could be informed, when choosing a next automobile, about its fuel-efficiency (or inefficiency), its greenhouse gas emissions, and the effect certain options could have on its consumption and the environment, as well as the costs the choices could call for. Paired with tax rebate programs, eco-energetic labels could have a very educational effect, possibly changing mentalities and bringing consumers to make more responsible choices. To be totally effective, these programs would have to be carefully planned, and standards for label shape, content and display, imposed upon the companies.

The report reviews many initiatives and programs recently founded all over the world to encourage consumers to chose energy-efficient vehicles and lists some of their strong and weak points, as well as those of the Canadian government's motivational program. It suggests certain structures to help with the conception of more effective and equitable motivational programs.

Finally, the report encourages a questioning concerning the part advertisement has to play in promoting driving safety, ecological vehicle use and durable use of automobiles.

The report concludes with many recommendations, such as:

- the conception of a new labeling system based on the best foreign practices;
- the revision of tax rebate admission criteria, to ensure their equity and guarantee that motivational programs don't encourage consumers to buy more powerful vehicles;
- the creation of a study group to evaluate the stakes surrounding advertisement and environment, to eventually impose a code of ethics or other guideline to automobile advertising;
- the creation of many other motivational programs to encourage all other propositions;
- impact studies to prevent equity problems between different programs, or tax adjustments to compensate the effects otherwise.