

ASK THE VEHICLE SAFETY LAWYER – Frontal Modifications

As I drive around town, I see a number of trucks with a large bumper in front. I'm curious, what affect do these bumper guards have in the event of an accident?

I have been advocating against the use of cattle guards or brush guards for years. First, if the dealership that sold the vehicle didn't install the guard device and the truck is later involved in an accident, then the airbag system may not work properly because the vehicle was not designed with this guard feature in mind. Also, in the event of a frontal crash, the stiffness of the vehicle has been materially changed. This could affect vehicle crush, energy transfer and how all of the safety systems perform. Second, this device may be considered a material alteration to the vehicle and might void warranty coverage. Third, this device may prevent you or your family from pursuing a case against the vehicle manufacturer if something ever happened because the guard is a substantial modification to the vehicle. Fourth, the vehicle now becomes a virtual battering ram into any object you strike.

There are numerous other after-market items that consumers install on vehicles that void warranties, provide absolute immunity to the vehicle manufacturer and make the vehicle unsafe. For example, the muffler system that provides the "muscle car" sound may void the engine warranty and may provide immunity to the manufacturer and insurer in the event of a fire. The sound system with the oversized speakers and woofers can become a lethal projectile in the event of an accident. The CD case can become an unrestrained missile in the event of an accident. The oversized tires or custom wheels may look cool, but if they are not approved sizes for the vehicle, then the vehicle manufacturer is immune from liability. Also, oversized tires drastically change the handling characteristics of a vehicle which can lead to an accident. The manufacturer is also immune from liability if you lower the vehicle, lift the vehicle up, add any engine performance enhancements, place seat covers over the seats, install a seat belt pad or add electronic equipment that can disrupt the fuse circuitry that fires the airbags.

So what should a consumer do in the event he wants to customize his vehicle? First, check with an authorized dealer and get approval to make modifications in writing. Second, have certified and bonded technicians perform the customizing. Third, limit the changes you make. Remember, most vehicles are a depreciating asset. The more you invest, the more you will lose.

