

Global product recall

Toyota has just announced another in a series of global product recalls. How badly has this damaged the reputation of the Japanese firm, famous for its quality control systems?

- Which make of car do you drive? Why did you choose that make? Use some of the words in the box below. Compare and discuss your answer with a partner.

cost	reliability	comfort	eco-friendly	safety
design	speed	quality	brand	fuel-economy

Kaizen: a Japanese idea that encourages people to continue to improve their professional life
 Definition adapted from:
 Macmillan English Dictionary © 2007

- Read the headings (a-d) and match them to the correct paragraphs (1-4).

a) The future b) Japanese production values

c) Automobile recalls

d) Time-line of disaster

[1] Product recalls are common in business. Most product recalls are dealt with quickly and do little to impact on a company's reputation. In fact, consumers are often pleased when a company acts swiftly to deal with a fault. In the automobile industry, most major carmakers have been hit by recalls in the past: Ford, GM, Honda, Chrysler. However, the recent product recalls by car giant Toyota have already been damaging. An announcement of regret by Akio Toyoda, the company's president, may have come too late to prevent major damage to the Japanese automobile-maker.

[3] There is a deep irony about Toyota's troubles, because they concern 'quality' and 'safety'. Toyota, founded in 1937, was built on a number of core principles, one of them being continuous problem-solving. This is embedded in the Japanese word 'kaizen' which means 'improvement.' The firm's success was built on a culture of always stopping to fix problems, and of aiming to get quality right the first time. The company has always paid meticulous attention to detail. The fact that quality has been the outstanding feature of the Toyota brand is one reason why this product recall has been so damaging.

[2] In 2008, Toyota sold 8.9 million vehicles. The year before, the company had overtaken GM to become the world's largest producer of motor vehicles. Then, disaster struck. At the end of last year, the company was forced to recall millions of vehicles due to fears of a sticking accelerator pedal. January 2010 saw the announcement that up to 1.8 million cars were being recalled across Europe, including about 220,000 in the UK. Could things get any worse? This month, Toyota has recalled around 440,000 of the latest version of its eco-friendly hybrid car, the Prius, due to a problem with the brakes.

[4] In 1987, Johnson & Johnson acted swiftly after some painkillers were found to contain poison. All products were withdrawn, and in this case a solution was found. 20 years ago, Perrier's fizzy mineral water was found to be contaminated. Although the company recalled all its bottles, its sales and image never completely recovered. Will Toyota's reputation survive or will it suffer lasting damage? Having risen to be number one in the automotive industry, will these recalls cause it to slide back down the list?

- Read the complete article. Which product recalls are mentioned? Describe Japanese manufacturing culture.
- Decide which word does not form a strong word partnership with the word at the end of the line.

4.1	a) improve	b) monitor	c) recall	d) affect	e) control	QUALITY
4.2	a) raise	b) break	c) test	d) assess	e) measure	
4.3	a) excellent	b) average	c) high	d) poor	e) large	

- Answer the questions in small groups. Be ready to report back to the whole class.
 - Do you think Toyota will recover quickly, or will the damage done to the company last for years?
 - Do you know any examples of other product recalls? What happened? Was the company's image damaged?
 - What systems are in place to guarantee quality in your own company? Could these be improved in any way?