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Ad Firm Targets Emissions Proposal

■ Spots claim proposed rule to fight global warming will result in more traffic deaths.

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A public relations firm with ties to the automobile industry has launched ads suggesting that a proposed California rule to cut carbon dioxide exhaust could cause more people to die in traffic accidents.

Starring "Squeezy the Clown," the radio and newspaper advertisements by the Sport Utility Vehicle Owners of America use humor to make a questionable claim: The regulation to combat global warming will compel auto companies to make smaller vehicles, forcing California families into diminutive cars and trucks that could endanger their lives.

The campaign, which asks the public to sign a protest petition to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and other state officials, is an attempt to create grass-roots opposition to the carbon dioxide regulation before it can be approved by the California Air Resources

Board next month in Los Angeles.

But SUV Owners of America is not a grass-roots organization. It is run by Strat@comm, a Washington, D.C., public relations firm whose clients have included General Motors, Daimler-Chrysler and Ford, as well as the auto industry's two major trade groups.

The firm purchased the SUV owners' organization from its Wisconsin founder two years ago for an amount it declined to disclose. It turned it into a nonprofit group whose governing board is made up of Washington lobbyists.

"Like all Americans, we support efforts to make our air cleaner," the petition to California officials states. "But the new proposed rules (mandated by Assembly Bill 1493) to restrict CO2 from cars and trucks will not accomplish that goal. More importantly, these rules could kill or injure many Californians."

Consumer and environmental groups supportive of the global warming regulation say the ads are an example of

what has become known as an "Astroturf," or fake grass-roots, campaign.

Orchestrated by public relations professionals, the campaigns can generate a groundswell of opposition to regulations that a particular industry does not like. The campaigns, which have been waged by tobacco companies, HMOs and many others over the last decade, often rely on inflammatory arguments that might not be considered credible if they were made directly by an affected industry.

Critics call the SUV Owners of America campaign deliberately misleading. The 2002 law that directed the state to craft the global warming regulation specifically prohibits state officials from reducing vehicle weights and sizes, or banning large SUVs, they say.

"These guys are not just exaggerating, they are outright lying," said Russell Long of the environmental group Bluewater Network, which helped write the law. "It creates an artificial backlash to something that does not exist."

Automakers deny any connection to SUV Owners of America.

"My understanding is that they are a completely independent organization. We do not have any ownership stake in SUVOA," said General Motors spokeswoman Joanne Krell.

A spokesman for SUV Owners of America, which claims 23,000 supporters and does not charge membership fees, said its funding comes from individual donations and banner ads on its website.

Many of the banner ads promote SUVs, such as the Chevy Avalanche and Jeep Grand Cherokee. One touted a 2003 Dodge Durango — a model nearly two years older than the Durango soon to appear in dealer showrooms around the country.

"Frankly, it does not matter who else we might work for. What matters is what we have to say about the issues — such as the safety record of these [sport utility] vehicles," said Ron Defore, a Strat@comm founder who serves as the SUV group's communications director.

"There is nothing sinister about it," Defore said. "Frankly, it is common in this town for people to wear two hats."

Defore added that the easiest known way to reduce carbon dioxide exhaust is to build vehicles that burn less fossil fuel. Therefore, he argued,

automakers will clearly react by producing smaller cars and trucks to improve fuel efficiency, even if California's regulation does not require them to downsize.

To support the safety concerns the group has raised, Defore pointed to studies by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety showing that SUVs were among the safest newer-model cars. But other data points to the opposite conclusion, including figures released this month by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which showed that SUVs are much more likely to roll over than other passenger vehicles in an accident, exposing the occupants to a greater chance of death or serious injury.

Asked what kind of car he drove, Defore declined to answer, saying only that he has driven SUVs in the past and was "in the market for a Hummer." Defore made the same remark in news articles published last year.

California's global warming regulation seeks to reduce tailpipe emissions of carbon dioxide by nearly 30%. It would apply to cars and light-duty trucks sold in the state from the 2009 model year onward. Its requirements would increase over eight years, according to the most recent draft of the proposal, which is set to be approved Sept. 23.

Although the rule is not intended to reduce the size of

cars and trucks, it is clearly going to make them more expensive. Automakers may be forced to make standard newer technologies that up to now have largely been sold as options. Included are transmissions that continually shift to find the most fuel-efficient gear and alternative refrigerants in air-conditioning systems.

As a result, the price of an average car or small truck will go up \$626, and a larger truck or SUV \$955, according to air board officials' estimates. Automakers dispute those figures, saying the increase is likely to be significantly greater.

While California makes up roughly one-tenth of the nation's car buying market, the rule could have nationwide — and even international — effects, becoming a de facto standard for the auto industry.

California is the only state that has the authority to adopt air pollution regulations stronger than those set in the nation's capital. Other states can then follow California's lead — and a number do, citing frustration with weaker pollution rules being approved in Washington.

New York, Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont automatically adopt any air regulations approved by California. Connecticut, New Jersey, and Rhode Island have indicated they may approve California's global warming rule. Together,

the states make up more than one-fourth of the American car market. Canada is monitoring the California rule as well as a prototype for its own global warming regulation.

Automakers have been tight-lipped about the global warming rule, referring questions to a trade group, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers. It has indicated that the carmakers may sue California on the grounds that the state was unlawfully setting a new fuel economy standard.

Automotive analysts believe the industry, which has tried to cultivate a greener image after years of fighting California pollution rules, is careful to avoid being perceived as an enemy of the environment. A statewide poll last month by the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California found that 81% of respondents backed the global warming regulation. Schwarzenegger has said he supports it.