


there, since they are the ones who will become the next generation of consumers. We use specially developed text and visual educational materials to address such issues as contracts over the Internet and cell

phones and information on financial products like credit cards and insurance. We dispatch members as instructors to around a hundred schools every year, and we've addressed a total of 270,000 students

thus far. We use illustrations and worksheets so that our explanations are easy for high school students to understand, and the lectures are popular with teachers as well." 

## HOW MANUFACTURERS ARE ENSURING CONSUMER SAFETY

**O**ur motto is to 'Never Make an Unsafe Product,'" says Yoshio Nagamatsu, group manager of Corporate CS Division at Panasonic, one of Japan's leading manufacturers of consumer electronics. "Safety is our number-one concern throughout the planning and manufacturing process. To help us achieve the highest possible levels of safety, we not only carry out painstaking inspections as a matter of course, but also listen very carefully to the views of our consumers. By looking at safety issues from the perspective of the end user, we can often nip problems in the bud before they occur."

It was in order to prevent accidents and improve consumer safety that Panasonic established its VOC (Voice of the Customer) Office. The center analyzes the content of every customer call the company receives and compiles a detailed response by the following week to the production teams, providing feedback to the assembly line containing concrete suggestions for improvements that might include altering device specifications. It was in response to a call to the VOC Office that Panasonic decided to include a bitter-tasting coating on the small SD chips used in various digital products, to prevent children swallowing them by mistake. "This had never actually happened, but we took action because we decided that there was suf-

ficient risk of a serious accident occurring in the future."

Another way in which the company works to ensure the safety and peace of mind of its consumers is through its thorough after-sale service. "We believe that good after-sale service is an integral part of a safety-first approach to the manufacturing process. We have sales outlets all over the country, which are responsible for carrying out painstaking checks and repairs on products after purchase. We have 18,000 affiliated stores throughout the country. Rooted in the community, these stores perform a role similar to that of a local family doctor. As well as carrying out repairs, they can also respond to customer questions on how to use the products properly and so on. They are places people can rely on if a problem occurs.

"About ten years ago, in fact, an affiliated store with a customer list dating back 20 years helped us out with the swift recall of a kerosene heater that threatened to pose a risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. The assistance we received helped to prevent the incident from escalating into something more serious. We also work hard to guarantee the safety and peace of mind of our consumers overseas. After all, fully 50 percent of our sales come from outside Japan. In Vietnam and India, for example, we are increasing the number of Panasonic brand stores and

assigning permanent service representatives to work in them. They will help provide the same kind of after-sales service available at affiliated stores in Japan."

Other electronics manufacturers are also working hard to ensure consumer safety. At Mitsubishi Electric, product development from the planning stage onward works on the assumption of a worst-case scenario in terms of component deterioration and ensuing accidents. The safety of the consumer is the company's number-one priority. As part of its efforts to respond promptly to consumer concerns, Mitsubishi also provides information via its webpage on the status of investigations into defective products, as well as operating a site specially designed for homemakers and a customer call center that is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

At Sony, meanwhile, a system is in place to ensure that a report of any serious accident affecting consumer safety reaches top management within eight hours of the incident occurring.

With consumers increasingly concerned about product safety, building a culture of safety is a more pressing issue for companies than ever. The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry recognizes companies that have taken particularly impressive steps to ensure the safety of their customers with its Awards for the Best Contributors to Product Safety. 