



SHARI LEWIS | DISPATCH PHOTOS

Tim McCarthy prepares to shoot a commercial as Justin Case in his "cubicle" on the fourth floor of SafeAuto's headquarters in Columbus.

**A8**

The Columbus Dispatch  
SATURDAY  
JULY 18, 2009

Coming Sunday  
**STRANGE BEDFELLOWS?**  
Wal-Mart, union back health plan

**BUSINESS**

# MEET JUSTIN CASE

## (though he doesn't really exist)

By Steve Wartenberg  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

**J**ustin Case has a cubicle on the fourth floor of SafeAuto's headquarters building in Columbus. On his desk are a gumball machine, coffee mug, photo of Justin with a few friends — and a note reminding him of a 4:30 meeting.

That's so like Justin to be organized. He has a telephone (1-800-SAFEAUTO, Ext. 84555) and voice mail, an e-mail address (Justin.case@safeauto.com) and even a Facebook page with about 400 friends.

But Justin Case isn't an actual SafeAuto employee. He's a fictional character played by a Chicago actor, Tim McCarthy, 27, who doesn't have a car or the need for auto insurance.

"I'm shocked that people actually call SafeAuto and ask for Justin Case," McCarthy said. "I take it as a compliment that they believe he exists and they can trust him."

Justin Case has quickly become an iconic company character, much like the



People have actually called SafeAuto asking to speak with "solution specialist" Justin Case.

Geico gecko and Flo the Progressive Insurance lady.

He has become the face of SafeAuto, which provides state minimum auto insurance in Ohio and 13 other states ... just in case.

"It's been beyond our wildest expectations," said Elie Deshe, the company's director of emerging media and event marketing, and developer of the multimedia advertising campaign.

"It already feels like Justin's been here forever."

Forever began May 1 with the airing of the first series of six Justin Case commercials and a related print, Web and multimedia campaign. Justin, a solution specialist, is touted as being on the job 24/7, solving problems and "keeping you legal for less."

By the way, "solution specialist" is not an actual Safe Auto job designation.

Deshe would not provide specifics but said the campaign will cost tens of millions of dollars and could last years.

SafeAuto is no stranger to television

See **JUSTIN** Page A9

### JUSTIN

FROM PAGE A8

advertising, having shot about 750 commercials the past 15 years, most in central Ohio with local actors and crews. But never before has the company had a recurring character, or one with a name.

In conjunction with the Justin Case commercials, SafeAuto also has developed a series of commercials starring an unnamed rocket scientist.

SafeAuto's approach, bypassing famous names in favor of more generic characters, reflects a new trend in advertising toward presenting an average Joe or Jane, someone people can relate to, especially in the midst of a recession. Nationwide recently launched an advertising campaign featuring company employees.

Actual celebrities cost a lot and "Consumers aren't

buying into them like they used to," said Osei Appiah, an advertising professor in Ohio State University's School of Communication.

"(Justin Case) seems like an everyday Joe who is not only honest and trustworthy but believes in the product and is sharing his enthusiasm for it," Appiah said.

He gives the campaign high marks and said he quizzed four people about it. All four had seen the commercials, and three thought Justin was an actual SafeAuto employee.

"They weren't disappointed when I told them he was an actor," Appiah said. "They said it made sense and still enjoyed the overall humor and message."

The idea for Justin Case came from Paul Werth Associates, a Columbus public-relations and advertising firm.

"The idea was for a spokesperson, not a celebrity ... someone people would

"I take it as a compliment that they believe he exists and they can trust him."

**TIM MCCARTHY**  
aka Justin Case

trust," said Ken Waldron, the company's chief creative officer and director of the Justin Case commercials.

The name came "as we sat around thinking of ideas and we kept saying 'just in case of an accident' or 'just in case this happens' and that led to Justin Case."

A huge casting call led to McCarthy, a talented but unknown actor looking for a break.

"We all immediately agreed he was the guy," Waldron said.

Acting trustworthy is harder than it sounds.

McCarthy uses his father,

Kevin, a medical-supply salesman as his muse.

"He is straight business, a born salesman," he said. "I couldn't do his job; I can only fake it. You draw from what you know."

Waldron said the Justin character is based loosely on Jim from the popular sitcom *The Office*.

"(Justin) probably lives with roommates and he's the overachiever in the group, the only one who wears a tie to work," he said. "He's a little more put together than (SafeAuto's) target group, but not so stiff he's above anyone."

Waldron is in the midst of shooting the second batch of commercials, which will air in September.

Justin will get a back story, including insight on how he got his name and grew up helping family and friends solve problems.

There will also be a love interest.

Her name is Katie. She's

someone Justin had a crush on years ago and is quite the looker.

Deshe "plays" Justin on his Facebook page, posting comments and answering questions from fans.

Using social networking and emerging media, such as Internet videos, in the campaign has helped spread the word, he said. "We find the next-best thing out there and apply it."

This puts Safe Auto at the forefront of a growing advertising trend, Appiah said.

"It's an excellent way of extending a campaign," he said. "It allows consumers to do some of the marketing for you by spreading the word in a viral campaign."

Spreading the Justin Case word will continue for several years.

"Good campaigns have legs and bad ones don't," Deshe said. "With this one, we have the ability to go on for a long time."

swartenberg@dispatch.com