

Advancements accelerate for car multimedia devices



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Cars are getting smarter. These days, some of them can ask you what song you want to hear and let you talk to friends with no hands on a phone. But that is just the beginning. A look at the technology displayed at the recent Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas shows that in-car technology is expected to advance tremendously this decade. Soon we'll be looking to our smart phones for information about our cars, and twitter, texts and e-mail will be at our fingertips.

TV in the car

In-car DVD players have been around for years, but what about watching live TV in your car? Look for more of this technology coming to vehicles, mostly as an aftermarket add-on. Burlington, Iowa-based antenna maker Winegard showed a mobile screen with a built-in antenna that can be hooked onto the passenger seat so a person in the back seat can watch TV. A high-power signal makes watching TV as smooth as listening to the radio, Winegard says. Korean firm Cydle plans to start offering it in its navigation displays by March. In October, Chrysler announced that it would start offering live TV in its vehicles.

Cost: Depending on the provider, \$250-\$630, and a monthly fee may be charged.

Internet radio

Look for automakers and car stereo companies to find ways to bring Internet radio, such as Pandora, to your car. Pandora is a Web site that builds a playlist based on the artists you like. Pioneer unveiled a new system that lets you plug in your iPhone, with the free Pandora application loaded on it, and up pops a screen that lets you access your Pandora stations and use some of the functions available on the phone on the car's in-dash screen. Ford unveiled a similar system that lets drivers use the touch screen to give a song a thumbs up or thumbs down, which helps Pandora decide which songs to play next. In Ford's system, a user will be able to program Pandora stations into the car radio's pre-set buttons. This technology is on its way. When and how much is unknown.

Cost: To be announced.

In-car cameras

Think of it as a black box for your car. It's a camera made for your car that constantly records, over and over on whatever-size memory card you put into it. And when your vehicle feels an impact, the recorder will save the recording permanently. A few companies have introduced the technology including DriveCam and BrickHouse Security. Korea-based Cydle plans to release its version by the end of March. Cost: \$100-\$350.

A smart phone as your key fob

We rely on our cell phones for e-mail, the Internet, music and more. How about using them to unlock your car doors and turn on your vehicle? That's coming sooner than you think. Directed Electronics, which also makes car security systems, is selling a service that lets drivers use their iPhones, and soon their BlackBerrys, to unlock and lock their cars, open the trunk and start their vehicles. Mercedes-Benz, through Hughes Telematics, offers a similar feature. Through OnStar, the Chevy Volt will have a similar service that also will let drivers use their smart phones to start charging the vehicle and start the heat or air-conditioning.

Cost: Depends on the service. A Directed Electronics aftermarket option, called Viper SmartStart, costs about \$500 and \$29.99 a year after the first year.

Cell-phone mounting systems

As more drivers use their cell phones, they are turning to in-vehicle cell-phone holders, especially for navigation. With adhesives, suction cups and clips, they can be attached to dashboards, windshields and between heating and cooling flaps, so you don't have to keep your phone in the cupholder and you know it won't slide between the seat and the console.

Cost: Varies. Examples at CES ranged from \$30 to \$60.

In-car assistants

As more cities ban in-car texting, there is a cottage industry springing up around services that offer voice-activated texting and e-mailing in your car. Here's how it works: A driver calls a number, tells the automated operator that he or she needs to send a text message and names the recipient. Here comes the beep, and the driver records the message. Texting is just one thing these in-car assistants can do. They also can read new texts, read e-mails, read and send Tweets and read a driver's calendar, RSS feeds and more. Two of the companies that offer these services are Wixom-based Got2bWireless and Dublin, Ireland-based Dial2Do. These phone services come with accessories, such as a Bluetooth earpiece by Bluetrek Technologies that connects directly with the Dial2Do service.

Cost: Expect a monthly service fee. Dial2Do charges \$3.99 a month, plus the cost of any hands-free accessories. The Bluetrek Bluetooth earpiece costs \$89.99 and will be out this spring. Got2bWireless' hands-free system costs \$109, not including installation, or as these firms like to say, "cheaper than a ticket" from the police.

Sync competitors

In late 2008, the exclusivity deal between Ford and Microsoft expired, allowing the software company to work with other automakers to develop hands-free in-car infotainment systems. And now we're seeing the results. Kia showed its Microsoft-based Uvo system at the Consumer Electronics Show. An option on the 2011 Kia Sorento, due later this year, Uvo lets drivers use

