

# Dear Silicon Valley: Stay out of My Car

By Bill Snyder

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Consumer electronics should help us to get our work done and make our lives more enjoyable. It shouldn't kill us.

But a new generation of devices that bring e-mail, the Internet and digital entertainment into our cars has the potential to do just that. "The trend scares me to death," says David Strayer, a professor of psychology at the University of Utah who has studied the use of cell phones and other electronic gadgets in automobiles.

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That's not just scare talk. A study by the National Highway Transportation Safety Institute (an arm of the Department of Transportation) found that nearly 6,000 people died in 2008 in crashes involving a distracted or inattentive driver, and more than half a million were injured. And while we might think that hands-free devices remove that risk, it turns out that few of us have the mental bandwidth to focus on more than one task while driving. "You can be looking out the windshield and think you're paying attention -- but you're not," Strayer says.

[Texting While Driving Six Times More Dangerous Than Talking](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

[NTSB to Staffers: No Talking, Texting in Car--Even Hands-Free](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

What's in the "Connected Car"

The issue isn't a new one, but the plethora of tempting devices unveiled at [this year's Consumer Electronics Show](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, has added urgency to an ongoing debate. There were some 380 exhibitors showing auto-electronics gadgets such as mobile TV and high-speed Internet access for cars. Indeed, sales of such technology totaled about \$9.3 billion in 2009, according to the Consumer Electronics Association.

Here's some of what was on display in Las Vegas:

Ford has updated its Microsoft-backed Sync technology and made it the basis for a new driver interface and dashboard design called myFord Touch. Displays include two small color LCD screens on either side of the speedometer, with the left-hand one showing vehicle functions and

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the right-hand one displaying entertainment, phone and data controls. An 8-inch touchscreen LCD sits at the top of the center stack and has a customizable interface, so that a driver can choose to display his own choice of functions rather than navigate via menus.

For connecting those gadgets, the media hub on myFord Touch [5] systems includes two USB ports, an SD slot and RCA audio/visual input jacks. The car also can become a WiFi hotspot when a USB broadband modem is connected to one of the ports. Some of the Ford technology is voice controlled, some isn't, but in either case it seems like that's an awful lot of information for a driver to handle while, he or she is, well, driving.

Hughes Telematics and its prototype "connected car of the future" offers in-car "personal information" such as sports, weather, news, gas prices and traffic on demand. Drivers can use the system to synchronize their vehicle with data from an MP3 player, PDA, or mobile phone, enabling voice-controlled access to personal play lists, address books, calendars and email." The company is working with Mercedes-Benz, which already offers Hughes technology in some of its cars.

Got2bwireless sells after-market systems, and boasts that its hands-free products bolster safety. The system has a speech to text feature that allows a driver to send a text message by voice. Other Got2bVoice features vocalize emails and replies, allow you to hear your calendar, and update Facebook pages and Twitter posts.

Why do these types of devices scare me? "Listening to a short text message is probably okay," says Strayer." "But trying to pay attention to a complex e-mail is a bad idea, it overloads the driver." Strayer and his colleagues have found that only about 2.5% of the population are what he calls "supertaskers," that is people who can conduct multiple, complex tasks at the same time.

Prices and availability of these devices are still in flux.

### An Electronic Eye on Teen Drivers

The first day your son or daughter solos in a car is generally pretty stressful -- for the parent. But now, there a way you can keep tabs on teens while they drive and get real time information on where they are and how well they are handling the car.

The hardware and service bundle is called Tiwi, sold by Inthinc, a West Valley City, Utah, company whose monitoring equipment is installed in cars competing in NASCAR races. Tiwi includes a GPS and a cellular modem. It monitors the speed of the car, and checks it against a database of local speed limits. If the car exceeds that limit, a computer-generated voice will tell the driver to slow down. If he or she doesn't comply within 15 seconds, an alert is sent to the parent via text message, email or phone call.

The system has an accelerometer which detects overly aggressive braking or cornering, and notifies the driver. Tiwi also can detect whether the driver or passenger is wearing a seat belt. If you get really concerned, you can call the car via the built in hands-free phone, a feature that also allows the driver to reach you with the touch of a single button.

The Tiwi bundle isn't cheap. It costs \$299, plus \$39.99 a month. It's a new service, and if it catches on, prices may well come down. One insurance company, Ampac, offers a 15% discount to young drivers whose cars are equipped with Tiwi, and others may follow, says Jeff Harvey, executive vice president of Inthinc.

Although, it is reasonable to assume that consumer electronics devices have the potential to distract drivers, exactly how dangerous that might be is unclear. Also unclear is how much safer hands-free devices will make drivers of connected cars, says Paul Green, a research professor at the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute. There simply hasn't been enough research conducted, he says.

One group that didn't make a splash at CES was the auto insurance industry. According to Strayer, insurance companies have been quietly following the connected car trend, and at some point might decide that in-car electronics should affect rates.

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