



ROBIN SPRINGER

VOICE
VALUE

Fatal Distractions

Speech tech companies promote hands-free devices to prevent accidents

There's been a lot of talk about distracted driving lately. Nearly every state in the country has legislation to address it, more laws are being introduced to combat it, and manufacturers in the automotive, software, and mobile phone industries, among others, are exploiting the opportunity to market their products as effective solutions to decrease distracted driving and its associated dangers.

Distracted driving refers to the performance of activities that could divert a driver's attention from the primary task of driving. While this includes texting or talking on a cell phone, it also encompasses using a navigation system, tuning the radio or adjusting other vehicle controls, talking to passengers, eating, drinking, grooming, reading, and driving with your adorable puppy in your lap. Distracted driving even includes focusing on activity outside the car.

While phone use was the second-most-recorded associated factor of in-vehicle distraction in commercial vehicle operations (3.4 percent of crashes), according to a 2009 Department of Transportation report, simply talking on a phone or CB radio was not found to increase risk; the manual interaction with the device was shown to be the relevant factor. (Conversing with another passenger was the factor cited most often in in-vehicle distraction.) The study did not address the issue of "voice-activated, hands-free driving," which would allow the driver to keep his eyes on the road, but acknowledged that this would likely reduce visual distraction.

Texting requires visual, manual, and cognitive attention, which makes it one of the most dangerous forms of distracted driving. Sending or reading a text takes one's eyes off the road for an average of 4.6 seconds over a six-second interval. At 55 miles per hour, that's like driving the length of a football field blindfolded.

In 2009, 5,474 people were killed in crashes involving driver distraction—that's a total of 16 percent of fatal crashes—according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. And the presence of in-car distractions shows no sign of decreasing. CTIA, the international association for the wireless telecommunications industry, estimates that in June 2011, nearly 197 billion text messages were sent or received in the United States (up nearly 50 percent from June 2009), and cell phone use totaled 2.25 trillion minutes.

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Speech technology has permeated the automotive industry as a means to address the problem. In North America and Europe combined, 43.4 million cars will have some type of voice interface by 2017, according to an estimate by research and consulting firm Frost & Sullivan. And most, if not all, car companies are racing to implement speech recognition safety features to make communicating while driving safer. On average, using speech recognition keeps drivers' eyes on the road 200 percent to 300 percent better than using manual input, Nuance reported in 2009.

Currently, Ford SYNC offers voice-activated music search and voice-activated SiriusXM Satellite Radio, Audi connect uses Google Voice Local Search, and Hyundai's Blue Link has Voice Text, which allows subscribers to dictate text messages and send them by voice to predefined recipients. Drivers can also request locations of restaurants, gas stations, and the like, and receive the information back aurally.

Blue Link uses Vlingo's technology for POI search and Voice Text, and Nuance for on-board telematics. Hyundai owners are given a personal Web page on Hyundai's Web site on which they can store information. For example, to use Voice Text, users first store a recipient list online, including the recipient's name and phone number. Users must opt-in to every piece of information that is stored on the site, and the customer owns the data, says Michael Dietz, senior group manager for Connected Car at Hyundai Motor America.

What consumers may not realize is that there is a privacy issue at play, and not just in cars. Every service a person uses, whether it's a cell phone, GPS, Internet connection, or car communication service, leaves digital footprints. And the more services one uses, the more digital tracks remain.

People may spend a lot of time thinking about the safety ratings of the different models before purchasing a car, including availability of speech technologies, but most consumers don't put the same diligence into understanding the privacy rights they may be forfeiting. They may not even realize an issue exists. ☒

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