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Cars born to run with smartphone apps

John R Quain, New York Times, Updated: October 17, 2010 11:07 IST



New York: Most auto dealers will tell you that more buyers ask about how to connect an iPhone to a car or about the latest collision avoidance systems than they do about how quickly a car goes from zero to 60. So automakers are pumping up the technology.

The most prevalent trend this season involves smartphones and apps. For example, Carbonga, a \$4.99 iPhone program, works with a \$99 cable to connect the phone to a car's diagnostics port (the OBD II plug under the dash that mechanics use). Plug in the phone, and Carbonga will tell you why the check engine light came on and why it is or is not a problem.

More important, automakers themselves have discovered the potential of smartphone-based apps. Mazda offers a roadside assistance app, for example, with the free assistance provided under the warranty period (36 months or 36,000 miles). The program automatically tells the tow truck where you are and estimates when help will arrive.

Mercedes-Benz, as part of its newly revamped on-board communications system called Mbrace, offers a Blackberry and iPhone application that allows owners to lock or unlock their vehicles remotely -- even if the owner is in New York and the car is in Los Angeles.

General Motors' OnStar and Ford are pushing new 2011 systems that will allow drivers to control some smartphone apps with voice commands or existing in-car controls, like the buttons on a steering wheel.

Ford's AppLink is an adjunct to its Microsoft-based Sync system. Sync, a \$300 option, lets drivers play music from connected MP3 players, get turn-by-turn directions and listen to text messages using voice commands. AppLink works with Sync by providing the same kind of voice control over apps that work on Blackberry and Google Android-based smartphones, like the HTC Droid Incredible.

The idea is to be able to offer continually updated services and features by relying on the smarts of smartphones rather than on in-dash computers, which may be obsolete before they roll off the assembly line. The first apps that work with Sync are Open Beak (a

Twitter reader), Pandora (a music service) and Stitcher (a podcast news and information service).

To its network of human operators who can assist drivers with directions and emergencies, OnStar will add MyLink, a group of Apple and Android smartphone apps that can be controlled with voice commands. The company plans to offer text messages that can be read aloud, spoken Facebook updates and the ability to play back Web-based Pandora channels over a car's stereo system.

Both companies say the voice controls will reduce the threat of driver distraction. They plan to introduce these features gradually, starting this fall and extending over the next year. Ford is starting now with the 2011 Fiesta, the first vehicle to include AppLink. OnStar says all 2011 and later models will be upgradeable to its free MyLink service.

Many car manufacturers offer collision warning systems that use radar to detect an imminent crash and then chime and flash lights at the driver. But the most ambitious -- and impressive -- automotive safety technology introduced this year is Volvo's pedestrian detection system, first

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appearing on the 2011 S60.

Using a combination of radar and video camera sensors, the detection system can pick out people (and cyclists) near the moving car. If it believes that a pedestrian is about to step in front of the car, it will warn the driver.

Better still, if a pedestrian does suddenly appear in the car's path -- and the inattentive driver does nothing -- the car sounds a series of warnings and then brakes the car to a complete stop. It works at speeds up to 22 miles per hour; at higher speeds, it will slow the S60 down but will not be able to prevent an impact.

The S60 model with the pedestrian collision avoidance system is \$40,650, but similar technology can be added to older vehicles. Mobileye, the company whose technology is behind the Volvo video system, is offering the \$920 (installed) C2-270, a camera-based warning system that can be installed in any car.

It includes a round display that is mounted on the dash, and it will warn drivers if they are following another car too closely, drifting out of a lane or about to hit a pedestrian. However, it must be installed by an approved dealer, and it will not brake the car. Such computer-controlled systems join the ranks of other automated so-called active controls, like the growing array of parking assist options. These systems are meant to address the bane of every student driver, the dreaded parallel parking test.

Introduced in the United States on the 2007 Lexus LS 460, the feature is creeping into other vehicles from a variety of manufacturers, including Volvo, Ford and the 2011 BMW 5 Series. Essentially, parking assist systems use sensors, either a series of cameras or sonic sensors, to determine if a parking space is big enough. They then direct the driver into the proper starting position. After that, they will steer the car snugly into the space; all the driver has to do is operate the brake and gas.

As with any new technological offerings, how well this works depends upon how comfortable you are surrendering control or learning to adapt to a new array of bells and whistles. So it is always a good idea to take an extensive test drive before you buy.

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