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Talking Cars Like a Backseat Driver

AUTOMOBILE manufacturers say "talking cars" are a flop. It seems that people would rather talk to their cars.

The motoring public was promised dream cars with satellite navigation systems, anti-theft devices, dashboard screens to display maps and diagnostic troubleshooters that would give directions for making repairs.

What we got first was a buzzer to remind us to buckle seat belts that sounded like a nagging bureaucrat. Some buzzers have been replaced by chimes, but reminders are still with us.

Many newer cars have dashboard advisers that flash on when something needs attention, such as telling drivers they need to refuel or to turn off headlights when parking. A few models have electronic gadgets to turn off lights for you.

The Japanese led the way to the talking car with electronic voices coming from the dashboards saying

"The door is ajar" or "The key is in the ignition." American manufacturers began putting them on domestic models but the public hasn't taken to talking cars which state facts drivers should notice anyway, reports from Detroit say.

Manufacturers found drivers would prefer voice-actuated cars that will recognize voices and obey commands. When directed, lights would come on or the horn honk. "Start and Go" would get the car in motion or "Stop" apply brakes. Just like "Giddy-up" and "Whoa" started and stopped wagons.

A couple of years ago General Motors announced a device called "Critical Tracking Task." It was a 10-second test requiring a driver to keep a needle in the center of a meter by using the steering wheel or the car wouldn't start.

The purpose was to keep tipsy drivers from going anywhere, but maybe it was too tough for some sober drivers. The CCT test was sensitive to certain drugs and fatigue,

too.

Electronic progress has made it possible to put just about any kind of device on a car to regulate almost anything or remind drivers of anything they might overlook. But motorists may want less supervision than talking cars could give.

Cruise control, radios and tape players make motorists in temperature-controlled cars easy and comfortable, except for trucks, buses and cars speeding past.

Years ago somebody suggested that the speedometer be connected to a device to play certain songs at different speeds. At 70 mph it would come on with "Nearer, My God, to Thee" and at 80 it would play "Lord, I'm Coming Home." It didn't catch on.

Electronic supervision is too much like a "backseat driver." First thing you know they might program a dashboard map device to tell you just after crossing an intersection: "You should have turned at that corner."