

Tesla isn't alone with cars that can nearly drive themselves

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In this Monday, April 25, 2016, file photo, staff members talk with visitors as they sit inside a Tesla Model S electric car on display at the Beijing International Automotive Exhibition in Beijing. With all the attention paid to Tesla Motors' Autopilot system, you'd think the company was the only one making cars that can almost drive themselves. But many automakers have rolled out cars that do what Teslas do. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein, File)

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the company was the only one making cars that can almost drive themselves. But many automakers have rolled out cars that do what Teslas do.

The difference: Tesla debuted Autopilot, a suite of semi-autonomous driving features, with a swagger, while others tread more carefully.

Tesla's Autopilot allows the car to maintain a set speed, brake automatically and stay centered in its lane. Most luxury vehicles—and even some mainstream ones like the Honda Civic—can do the same. When Tesla upped the ante by offering automatic lane-changing, Mercedes-Benz quickly matched that.

"I don't think Tesla is way ahead in terms of the technology. They view themselves as a technology company, so they're going to push it," said Adrian Lund, president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, an insurer-funded group.

Pushing it is important. Automakers are feeling pressure to make sure tech companies like Google and Apple don't leapfrog them with [driverless cars](#) of their own.

They also see dollar signs: Ford CEO Mark Fields says car companies currently make \$2.3 trillion in revenue each year. The global transportation business, including buses and car sharing, is worth \$5.4 trillion per year. Carmakers that develop autonomous taxis or ride-sharing services could get a big slice of that pie.

But if they aren't cautious enough, and driverless cars are deemed unsafe by consumers or regulators, a potentially life-saving technology might not make it to market. Critics have accused Tesla of pushing too far too fast following a crash in Florida that killed the driver of a Model S with Autopilot engaged.

Mercedes-Benz recently pulled an ad, titled "The Future," after Consumer Reports complained it implied that the 2017 E-Class sedan is capable of self-driving. The fine print for the ad says the car can't drive itself, but Mercedes said it didn't want to confuse drivers.



In this Tuesday, Sept. 29, 2015, file photo, Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla Motors Inc., talks during a news conference at the company's headquarters in Fremont, Calif. With all the attention paid to Tesla Motors' Autopilot system, you'd think the company was the only one making cars that can almost drive themselves. But many automakers have rolled out cars that do what Teslas do. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

General Motors delayed the introduction of its Tesla-like Super Cruise system because of safety concerns.

"They don't deploy it because they know that things can fail," said Raj

Rajkumar, a computer engineering professor at Carnegie Mellon University who leads its autonomous vehicle research.

Automakers have been slowly adding driver-assist features to their vehicles for years in an effort to make occupants safer and meet U.S. and European government mandates. Mercedes introduced adaptive cruise control, which automatically maintains a distance from cars in front, in 1999, four years before Tesla was founded. Ford introduced automatic parallel parking in 2009, six years before Tesla did.

The push toward autonomy intensified in 2011 when Google announced plans to develop fully self-driving cars by 2020.

A recent study by Boston Consulting Group predicts that 12 percent of the 111 million vehicles sold worldwide in 2025—or around 13 million vehicles—will be partially autonomous, up from less than 5 percent currently. It expects 1 percent of all vehicles sold—or around 1.1 million—to be fully driverless.

For the most part, traditional automakers modestly tout semi-autonomous driving features as safety options. They don't claim, as Musk does, that the cars can driver better than humans. An ad for the Infiniti Q50 sedan, for example, shows a driver thinking about projects and deadlines as his car looks out for hazards.

"Its instinct to protect leaves you free to drive," says the narrator.

Lund said traditional automakers also tend to make it more difficult—and expensive—to get semi-autonomous functions than Tesla does.



This undated photo provided by Mercedes-Benz USA shows the 2017 Mercedes-Benz E300 Sedan. Mercedes charges \$11,250 for a package of semi-autonomous features on the 2017 E-Class that also includes keyless entry, satellite radio and cabin air filtration. The E-Class starts at \$52,150. (Courtesy of Mercedes-Benz USA via AP)

Tesla's Autopilot comes as a separate \$2,500 software update on the Model S sedan, which starts at \$66,000. Mercedes charges \$11,250 for a package of semi-autonomous features on the 2017 E-Class that also includes keyless entry, satellite radio and cabin air filtration. The E-Class starts at \$52,150.

Consumers must also play a name game when hunting for advanced driving features. Volvo's semi-autonomous system is called "Pilot Assist," while BMW's is "Driving Assistant Plus" and Subaru's is "EyeSight."

"When people go shopping, they don't even know what to ask for," Lund says. Making semi-autonomous features standard and using fewer trade names would help, he says. He also wants automakers to share more data about how the systems work.

Consumers Reports has called for Tesla to drop the Autopilot name and to do more to ensure drivers remain engaged while the system is in use.

But Musk says Tesla is sticking by Autopilot—the name and the technology.

"When used correctly, it is already significantly safer than a person driving by themselves," he wrote in a recent blog post.

Some say tech-minded companies like Tesla deserve credit for prodding the traditional auto industry toward a driverless future. Fully driverless cars that communicate with each other could potentially save thousands of lives per year, advocates say. More than 30,000 people die in crashes each year in the U.S. alone.

"In the world of Silicon Valley, if it's not done yesterday, it's late," says Mark Peters, an airline pilot from Hurst, Texas, who traded in an older Tesla for a newer one so he could get Autopilot. "They are willing to take that risk that scares the daylights out of other companies."

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