

# Edmunds weighs pros and cons of in-car personal assistants

July 3 2019, by Brent Romans

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This undated image provided by Mercedes shows the MBUX system in use. The system provides many time-saving conveniences of voice command and personal assistant functions while you're on the road. (Behind the Wheel-Personal Assistants via AP)

In the near future, get ready to do a lot more talking to your car. Smartphone personal assistants, such as Apple's Siri, Amazon's Alexa and Google's Assistant, can be used for a variety of tasks. And thanks to greater availability of the Android Auto and Apple CarPlay smartphone

integration systems—just about every new vehicle you shop for in 2019 will offer them—these features can be used in your vehicle for voice commands and personal assistant tasks.

Automaker-specific personal assistant systems are happening, too. BMW and Mercedes-Benz debuted their systems earlier this year at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. Edmunds believes other automakers will come out with similar systems in the next few years.

But what's it like having smartphone integration and voice personal assistant systems in your car? Are they truly useful or more of a gimmick? Edmunds examines these new systems and offers some recommendations.

## SMARTPHONE VOICE COMMANDS

Android Auto and Apple CarPlay allow you to connect your phone to your car and utilize many of your phone's apps, such as map navigation, text messaging and online music streaming. These systems are standard equipment on some vehicles and optional on others.

Many of these features work both on your car's central display screen as well as through [voice commands](#). You can either press a button or say a simple initiation prompt ("Alexa" or "Hey, Google") and ask to play your phone's music, check and adjust your calendar, keep up to date with the news cycle, and order whatever product just popped in your head.

These systems are largely restricted to cars that have come out in the past few years. But it's possible to add the technology, even if you have an older car. For example, you can add an Amazon Echo Auto unit to enable Alexa with a minimum of fuss. There are also aftermarket stereos that feature Apple CarPlay and Android Auto.

Overall, smartphone integration is a worthwhile feature to get. Just connect your phone to the car, typically with a USB cord, and you're ready to go. We've found these systems help you keep your eyes on the road rather than on your phone.

## HEY, MERCEDES, TELL ME A JOKE

Basic automotive voice command and speech recognition functionality has existed in vehicles for years. But these new systems from BMW and Mercedes take it to an entirely new level. Mercedes' MBUX is available in a few all-new vehicles such as the entry-level A-Class. Conceptually, the system works similarly to Siri and Google Assistant. You say a command prompt and then state a question or request.

The main advantage is that MBUX allows you to interact with your car's features, something the smartphone assistants can't do. After a "Hey, Mercedes" prompt, you might say, "Give me a massage" and the car will turn on a seat massager for you. Or you can state "I need gas" and MBUX will give recommendations for nearby gas stations. Since MBUX is a natural speech system, you don't have to be specific in your wording. It's also intelligent enough to answer other questions such as "When are the Yankees playing next?"

BMW's Intelligent Personal Assistant system, which debuts in the redesigned 2019 3 Series sedan, works in a similar fashion. As with the Mercedes system, checking vehicle status is another useful feature. For example, you can ask, "How is my tire pressure?" and the system will report on any potential issues.

## HELPING THE TECH-AVERSE

Overall, in-car assistants are surprisingly useful, especially for drivers who dislike learning complicated vehicle interfaces. Instead of poking

around for buttons, selecting functions through multiple on-screen menus or reading the owner's manual, you can typically just ask for what you want. In general, we've found the Mercedes system easier to set up and better at recognizing specific requests than BMW's.

Downsides are few. It can get a little frustrating when the system doesn't act on a spoken request since it can be hard to know whether the system simply didn't understand you or whether you arrived at a functional dead end. In the latter scenario, no matter how you say the request, the vehicle won't be able to comply. Also, these systems require a cellular connection in order to work, either through your phone or a dedicated 4G data connection provided by the vehicle. If there's no connection, you won't be able to use most of the voice command functions.

**EDMUNDS SAYS:** Smartphone integration systems are now in almost every new vehicle sold, and the next wave will be [vehicle](#)-specific personal assistants. In both cases, the functionality offered can help reduce driver distraction and make driving easier.

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