

Smart cars could break into mainstream

March 29 2013, by Troy Wolverton

Traditionally, consumers have largely selected cars on the basis of size, color, power and price. But increasingly two new factors are influencing their choice: The kind of wireless connection it has and the kinds of mobile applications it runs.

Noting the wide popularity of smartphones and the apps that run on them, carmakers are moving to make their vehicles more connected and smarter.

Some drivers already are able to access a few of the apps they enjoy on their smartphones, such as Pandora or [Yelp](#). Soon, [automakers](#) plan to tap cars' wireless connections, sensors and built-in computers to allow drivers to connect to an even wider variety of apps and to offer drivers and their passengers information such as precise, real-time traffic and weather alerts, along with improved [safety features](#).

"I call the car the ultimate mobile device," said Thilo Koslowski, vice president of the automotive practice at Gartner, a technology research firm. "We're just at the beginning of seeing how that [device platform](#) will become important and significant in its own right."

This year, about half of all cars sold in the United States will include support for apps, either running them directly on their entertainment consoles or by allowing consumers to use those consoles to interact with apps on their smartphones, according to Juniper Research. By 2017, Juniper, a wireless industry research firm, believes that nearly all cars sold will be "app connected" in one of these two ways.

[Smartphone](#) toting consumers are already interacting with apps in their cars, using them to get directions, listen to music or send text messages. Carmakers and [industry analysts](#) increasingly assume that these consumers want to be able to more easily interact with those apps or similar ones while driving. And there are growing safety concerns about distracted drivers focusing on their relatively tiny smartphone screens instead of on the road ahead.

"[Car companies](#) are realizing that people are extremely wedded to their smartphones. They don't want to put them down," said Tom Mutchler, senior automotive engineer at Consumer Reports. "If a car company can provide the information you want on your dashboard screen ... they're going to make buyers happy."

Consumers and car reviewers are already judging cars in part on their entertainment [console](#) systems and app options. Ford, for example, saw its ratings from J.D. Power and Consumer Reports fall in recent years thanks to numerous problems with its Sync system, which offers navigation, entertainment and, in some case, access to apps.

In a statement, Ford said it has worked to address the problems through software updates, and despite them, some 74 percent of new Ford owners say they would recommend the Sync system to friends.

Sync is "helping us attract new customers and sell cars and trucks," the company said in the statement.

Mark Hull, a product manager at LinkedIn, said that the technology built into the entertainment console of his new Lexus RX 450h was a key consideration in his decision to purchase the vehicle. The sport-utility vehicle allows access to smartphone apps such as [Pandora](#) and Facebook; offers real-time sports, weather and traffic information, and includes a built-in navigation system.

"I looked at other cars, but I've always liked Lexus' technology better than other brands," said Hull, a San Jose, Calif., resident.

Connected and smart cars could offer automakers other benefits besides brand loyalty and vehicle sales. Built-in wireless connections could allow them to offer add-on services, such as real-time parking information. And automakers could eventually harvest data collected from connected cars to do things like keep track of mechanical problems or to sell to data collectors.

"Automakers see this opportunity for connected car technology to net them some benefits in many different ways," said Mark Boyadjis, a senior analyst in research firm IHS's automotive group. "Automakers can learn a lot about consumers and a lot about their vehicles."

But automakers are still trying to figure out the best way to make cars smarter and more connected. In some cases, they are building wireless connections into their cars and offering apps that run directly on the vehicles' entertainment consoles. In other cases, they rely on the wireless connections and apps built into drivers' smartphones.

Both approaches have their shortcomings. Because consumers replace cars far less frequently than phones, built-in systems can quickly become obsolete. Meanwhile, systems that rely on drivers' phones can't connect to an Internet radio station or emergency services if drivers forget to bring them or forget to charge them.

Some analysts say future cars will likely offer a hybrid of the two approaches. "Our view is you have to do both," said Greg Ross, director of business development at GM's global connected consumer group. "I think you have to accommodate (devices that are) brought in. And I think there are benefits to having a car always connected."

MAKING CARS SMARTER, MORE CONNECTED:

Cars are becoming more like your phone as automakers add [wireless connectivity](#) and the ability to run or interact with [mobile applications](#).

-Growing numbers: This year, about 50 percent of cars sold in the United States will have entertainment consoles that can either run apps themselves or control smartphone apps, according to Juniper Research. By 2017, nearly all cars sold in the U.S. will be capable to run or interact with apps.

-App central: Automakers including Ford are working with developers, allowing them to create apps that can interact with cars' built-in controls and touch screens and eventually tap into their [sensors](#). Manufacturers are also working to standardize the "hooks" that developers can use to interact with cars.

-Making connections: Carmakers are starting to build wireless data modems into their vehicles. Tesla's Model S has a built-in 3G radio, and General Motors has said that it will include an LTE radio in all of its consumer vehicles starting next year.

-Talking cars: Carmakers and the government are exploring systems that would allow cars to talk to each other, letting them share information on their current locations and traffic and weather conditions.

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