

The Last Word . . .

Drivers Who Value Life Should Keep Their Hands on the Wheel, Minds on the Road

By Guy Friddell

It's prudent to have a cellular phone in your car to use in the event of an emergency. Other than that, we'd best stay off that phone while driving.

Some 25 states have tried to restrict the use of cell phones, but even the hands-free phone can cause trouble. It's not just while dialing the call that we are at risk.

The nature of the chat can contribute to a crisis at the wheel. Just trying to concentrate on a verbal message can divert a driver's attention from the road.


A study by Michigan University notes that while listening on the phone or to an engrossing book on tape, a motorist often is staring straight ahead, oblivious to what's happening around him or her. If you do anything else while driving—say, eating—you're a disaster waiting to happen, it warns.

At Virginia Tech, the Center for Transportation Studies says that more diversions can mean less safety. At 65 mph, if a driver is distracted for half a second, the car travels 42 feet—two car lengths—with virtually nobody at the wheel.

Distracting gadgets are multiplying. Car makers are bringing the internet to the auto. Their pitch is

that so-called "smart cars" make drive time more productive. They promise e-mail, glove-compartment fax machines, a map on the dash, a cell phone that will call 911 when trouble looms. The car is morphing into a kind of mobile think tank, a third work-place after the office and home.

Keep in mind that of the more than 6 million crashes each year, 25 percent are caused by some sort of diversion.

At Virginia Tech, drivers are tested on a special track in cars rigged with computers, cameras and an information screen that make a video of their behavior while they are trying to read a map as they are on the move. One subject glanced at the map 20 times, half the duration of the test, failing to monitor 100 feet of dangerous driving. 

Mr. Friddell, a newspaperman for 56 years, is a columnist at the *Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, Va. He wrote this column and solicited comments from his readers. One called him and told him about being at a toll booth and seeing a driver steering with his knees while he was talking on the phone and fumbling for change for the booth. If you have had any experiences like that, e-mail or call the editor of this magazine. We'd like to share them with our readers.