

CARSIDE MANNER



After spending the better part of the last week reading up on all the new technologies being thrown into new cars, I think I see a trend developing. Automakers, realizing that most of us receive

the bulk of our driver's education at a local amusement park, have begun using the wonders of high tech to make the operation of their cars as idiot proof as possible.

Think about it. If you can find the brake pedal with either one or even both of your feet, the wonders of ABS make it all but impossible for you to lock up the brakes. If you have a hard time controlling vehicle direction in the forward mode, traction control can keep you from impaling your vehicle on the nearest guard rail. The air bag has been introduced to reduce the likelihood of death or dismemberment for those of us lacking the physical coordination needed to buckle a seat belt.

But these systems are all passive. They just do their job in spite of the driver. Unfortunately, until cars can be programmed to change their own oil and filters, they will continue to rely on the customer to take them in for service when a maintenance reminder light comes on. And they'll also rely on the driver to take the appropriate action when an idiot light signals a potential mechanical meltdown.

A recent Valvoline Oil Company poll posed the following true-false choice to poll participants: *If the oil light comes on while you're driving, you need to proceed to the nearest service station and add the proper amount of oil—(True or False).*

Seven out of ten answered that it was true, which is similar to saying "The best time to buy a fire alarm is when the flames start shooting out of your attic window."

It appears that oil lights aren't getting any more attention than seat belts. Why not use some of the electronic techniques which save drivers' skins to protect the rights of the innocent vehicle?

Call it "Increasing Driver Involvement."

Here are a few patentable suggestions:

• The KVOPA, or Kurt Vonnegut Oil Pressure Alarm.

Years ago, in one of his novels, Mr. Vonnegut humorously described a fire station siren powered by a war surplus Messerschmidt fighter plane engine. Needless to say, the siren's reputation extended far beyond the city limits.

Why not eliminate those easily ignored oil pressure warning lights, and install a glass shattering low oil pressure alarm siren powered by a MIG jet engine? MIG engines should be available in plentiful supplies at this time, and a blast from one of these babies should get the attention of the 70 percent who still don't feel the oil warning light is meaningful.

Is it real, or is this a dog fight?

• The Cattle Fence Coolant Temperature Sensor.

The American farmer learned years ago, that a measured amount of DC passing through a thin strand of fence wire can do more to control bovine wanderlust than the lesser pain inflicted by barbed wire. We already have heated driver side seats. Why not do a retrofit and introduce some attention-getting current to the posterior of any driver who ignores his engine overheat warning light?

• The Mileage Minder Hood Release.

Here's a real show stopper. Remember those maintenance interval reminder lights that had us hunting all over the vehicle for reset buttons? Why not hook the mileage counter to a solenoid activated hood release? At 30,000 miles, the hood opens, rain or shine, parked in your driveway or moving down the highway. This device could also be used to check adrenaline secretions in drivers who get their reminder at 65 miles per hour.

• The Secondary Ignition Loud Exhaust Reminder.

In our area, the most common cure for a loud exhaust is a louder radio. Those unwilling to silence their vehicles, often find that loud music is a low cost alternative to a new muffler.

Let's hook a computer to a sound meter. When the exhaust gets loud, the sound meter sends the computer into action. The black box has one of the secondary plug wires feed a few thousand kilovolts directly into the antenna wire, and simultaneously transfers maximum radio volume through a 100 watt per channel amplifier. On deluxe models, electric windows will close and lock, and the ventilation system will cease to function until the repairs are made.

If the staccato blasts of secondary spark in stereo still don't convince the owner to fix the car, a back-up system will play a 90 minute tape entitled, "Roseanne Sings the National Anthem and Other Assorted Ethnic Favorites."

If you have a few suggestions to add to the list, send them along. And bulk prices on MIG engines would speed up our research.

—By Ralph Birnbaum