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DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION

Promoting the Car Phone, Despite Risks

By [MATT RICHTEL](#)

Martin Cooper, who developed the first portable cellphone, recalled testifying before a Michigan state commission about the risks of talking on a phone while driving.

Common sense, said Mr. Cooper, a [Motorola](#) engineer, dictated that drivers keep their eyes on the road and hands on the wheel.

Commission members asked Mr. Cooper what could be done about risks posed by these early mobile phones.

“There should be a lock on the dial,” he said he had testified, “so that you couldn’t dial while driving.”

It was the early 1960s.

Long before cellphones became common, industry pioneers were aware of the risks of multitasking behind the wheel. Their hunches have been validated by many scientific studies showing the dangers of talking while driving and, more recently, of texting.

Despite the mounting evidence, the industry built itself into a \$150 billion business in the United States largely by winning over a crucial customer: the driver.

For years, it has marketed the virtues of cellphones to drivers. Indeed, the industry originally called them car phones and extolled them as useful status symbols in ads, like one from 1984 showing an executive behind the wheel that asked: “Can your secretary take dictation at 55 MPH?” ([View a timeline of ads marketing cellphones to drivers, and studies showing their risks.](#))

“That was the business,” said Kevin Roe, a telecommunications industry analyst since 1993. Wireless companies “designed everything to keep people talking in their cars.”

They succeeded. The federal government estimated in 2007 that 11 percent of drivers were talking on their phones at any given time. But that success has come at a cost. Researchers at Harvard have estimated that, even seven years ago, drivers using cellphones were causing 2,600 fatal crashes a year in the United States and 570,000 accidents that resulted in a range of injuries, from minor to serious.

And studies show that a driver talking on a cellphone is four times likelier to crash and that using a hands-free device does not eliminate the risk.

The industry notes that the mobile device has moved well beyond its origins as a car phone and argues that

research on the dangers of distracted driving is inconclusive, even as wireless companies have spent millions on campaigns to educate drivers.

But the industry's chief spokesman, [Steve Largent](#), acknowledged in recent interviews that those efforts have fallen short. He said the companies plan to do more, particularly in light of the explosion of [text messaging](#), which they say poses a profoundly serious risk.

The CTIA, the industry's trade group, supports legislation banning texting while driving. It has also changed its stance on legislation to ban talking on phones while driving — for years, it opposed such laws; now it is neutral.

“This was never something we anticipated,” said Mr. Largent, head of the CTIA, adding that distracted driving is a growing threat now that more than 90 percent of Americans have cellphones. “The reality of distracted driving has become more apparent to all of us.”

Critics of the industry argue that its education efforts over the years provided a weak counterbalance to its encouragement of cellphone use by drivers and to its efforts to fight regulations banning the use of cellphones while driving, or at least requiring drivers to use hands-free devices.

The critics — including safety advocates, researchers and families of crash victims — say the industry should do more, by placing overt warnings on the packaging and screens of cellphones.

The critics also say that even as the industry continues to pay lip service to the risks, companies are marketing a new generation of technology, like GPS applications for smartphones like the [iPhone](#) and BlackBerry, and wireless Internet access for cars. A description of one new application for the iPhone reads, “Maps on iPhone shows you live traffic information, indicating traffic speed along your route in easy-to-read green, red and yellow highlights.”

Clarence M. Ditlow, executive director at the Center for Auto Safety, a nonprofit advocacy group, was invited last month to speak about distracted driving by the [Federal Communications Commission](#). He told the audience that the cellphone industry was selling a product consumers can use dangerously — without properly warning them or providing safeguards.

He added: “The only questions are: what did they know, and when did they know it?”

Dawn of the Car Phone

On Oct. 13, 1983, hundreds of people, including reporters, photographers and TV crews, gathered at Soldier Field in Chicago for a special event.

The big draw? A cellphone call.

An executive from Ameritech, the regional phone company that sponsored the event, sat in the driver's seat of a [Chrysler](#) convertible and phoned a great-grandson of Alexander Graham Bell, who was living in Germany.

That call signified the introduction of mass-market commercial cellphone service, the equivalent of a moon

shot for the telecommunications industry.

“The whole idea of placing a call from anywhere — without wires — it was amazing,” said Joe Colson, then a department head at Bell Labs, the prominent research arm of the nation’s telephone giants, who was part of the crowd.

Their work capped an effort that began decades earlier with radio telephones.

On its Web site today, [AT&T](#) notes that the first mobile telephone call, using that early radio technology, took place in 1946. An accompanying picture shows a trucker, phone to his ear. “A trucker rolls with one of the first mobile phones,” the caption says.

But because of the expense and limits of that radio technology, wireless phones were used early on mostly by truckers and other professional drivers. In the 1960s, AT&T says, New York City had 2,000 customers with these phones, and they typically waited 30 minutes for a call to go through.

Early innovators, like Mr. Colson, saw new possibilities with the advent of smaller computer chips and batteries, as well as advances in wireless technology to simultaneously carry millions of conversations.

In ads, the industry promoted car phones as must-have accessories for the elite. In addition, it made sense to market to business people, who could justify the cost of cellphones as a way to make commuting time more productive.

In August 1987, an ad in The New York Times for Metro One, a mobile service provider, showed a man talking on a cellphone while driving a sports car with a surfboard in the back. The ad read: “You can reach all those important clients and still beat the traffic.”

A television commercial for Centel, an early cellphone provider that merged with [Sprint](#), shows a handsome businessman leaving the city in his Jeep while talking on his phone. His wife is on the other end, using her own portable phone, standing in a speedboat.

The marketing paid off. Cellphones, including portable models with brick-size batteries, became status symbols, used by [Michael Douglas](#) as Gordon Gekko in the 1987 movie “Wall Street.” (The first phones, like the one at Soldier Field, cost about \$2,800, with installation — around \$6,000 in today’s dollars.)

“It was like carrying around a Prada bag,” said Ray DeRenzo, now chief marketing officer for MobiTV, a TV service for phones, who in 1986 worked at Pacific Telesis.

In the late 1980s, one company even succeeded in selling tens of thousands of a \$16 replica of a car phone called the “Cellular Phoney.” The company motto: “It’s not what you own, it’s what people think you own.”

In late 1985, wireless companies had 340,000 customers. Only 10 years later, as the price of phones fell sharply, there were almost 34 million.

The industry poured profits back into expanding networks. In just 10 years, the number of cell sites rose to 68,000 in 1995 from 913. The industry planted many cell sites near highways, partly because it was easier than persuading homeowners to put them in neighborhoods, and drivers were crucial customers.

Mr. Roe, the longtime industry analyst, estimates that in the 1980s and early '90s, wireless companies got 75 percent or more of their revenue from drivers, a figure that fell below 50 percent by the mid-'90s and is now below 25 percent (the cellphone industry says it does not break out such figures).

In the late 1980s, the market remained heavily focused on drivers, even though the original car phones gave way to slimmer and less expensive portable cellphones.

Well into the 1990s, Mr. Roe said, wireless companies focused on three questions: "Can we cover the highways, do we have enough capacity to handle all the people on the highways, and is the signal strong enough?"

Mr. Colson, the engineer, said he was astonished by the popularity of cellphones, but he and others in the industry rarely paused to wonder about risks. "Driver distraction?" he said. "I mean, come on."

Troubling Studies

Mr. Cooper, now 80, and commonly referred to as the father of the cellphone for his early work at Motorola, sensed early on that the technology had risks.

"I'd pass by the exit I was supposed to take because I was talking on the phone," he said. Thinking back, he said he was "absolutely" aware of potential dangers but did not think roads would become filled with distracted drivers.

Other early innovators of cellphones said they felt nagging concerns. Bob Lucky, an executive director at Bell Labs from 1982-92, said he knew that drivers talking on cellphones were not focused fully on the road. But he did not think much about it or discuss it and supposed others did not, either, given the industry's booming fortunes.

"If you're an engineer, you don't want to outlaw the great technology you've been working on," said Mr. Lucky, now 73. "If you're a marketing person, you don't want to outlaw the thing you've been trying to sell. If you're a C.E.O., you don't want to outlaw the thing that's been making a lot of money."

Revenue for wireless service providers was soaring — to \$16 billion in 1995 from \$354 million in 1985. The industry had revenue of \$148 billion in 2008.

One researcher who spoke up about his concerns was quickly shut down. In 1990, David Strayer, a junior researcher at GTE, which later became part of [Verizon](#), noticed more drivers who seemed to be distracted by their phones, and it scared him. He asked a supervisor if the company should research the risks.

"Why would we want to know that?" Mr. Strayer recalled being told. He said the message was clear: "Learning about distraction would not be very helpful to the overall business model."

Outside the industry, others started raising red flags. In 1984, the AAA urged drivers to park before using their phones. In 1991, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety financed a laboratory study that found that drivers talking on cellphones had difficulty responding to challenging situations.

In 1997, the Canadian Ministry of Health and other groups helped finance research to determine whether

drivers distracted by cellphones were more likely to crash. The researchers' answer: a resounding yes.

They found that drivers using cellphones were four times likelier to get into accidents than drivers who were focused entirely on the road.

"This relative risk is similar to the hazard associated with driving with a blood alcohol level at the legal limit," the researchers wrote in [The New England Journal of Medicine](#). They said hands-free devices were no safer than hand-held phones because of the distraction that comes from focusing on a conversation, not the road.

In subsequent years, dozens of researchers also determined that phone use by drivers divides attention, slows reaction time and increases the risks of crashing. Their ranks included Mr. Strayer, who left GTE for academia to research distracted driving.

Using a driving simulator at the [University of Utah](#), he showed that drivers distracted by calls miss otherwise obvious sights along a virtual highway and that they face a four times greater crash risk, echoing other studies' findings.

The research was not easy for the industry to ignore, particularly given that a wireless company, AT&T, had helped pay for a widely publicized study.

AT&T paid Harvard researchers to study the economic value created by drivers using cellphones. In 2000, the researchers put that value at \$43 billion. But in late 2002, based on an update to the findings, it was those researchers who estimated that distracted drivers using phones also caused 2,600 deaths each year and 570,000 accidents that caused injuries.

Similar findings piled up. In 2005, the federal [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) published a bibliography of more than 150 scientific papers from the previous eight years about the dangers of cellphone use by drivers.

"It's been a very consistent picture," said Chris Monk, a researcher at the agency. "Frankly, I get a little annoyed that we continue to see studies that investigate the effects of cellphone use on driving, because they all show the same thing, whether you're talking hands-free or not."

Mixed Messages

Critics say the wireless carriers have sent mixed messages about the risks posed by drivers using cellphones.

The industry has resisted legislation to regulate cellphone use and, critics say, it has not warned drivers about dialing and talking as forcefully as it now warns them about texting.

Cellphone companies point out that for a decade they have run numerous public service ads, like AT&T's 2001 "Be Sensible" campaign, telling customers not to talk while driving through bad weather or heavy traffic. On its Web site, Verizon Wireless cites government recommendations that the safest course is to stay off the phone while driving.

The CTIA ran its first distracted-driving campaign in 2000, with the tagline: "With Wireless, Safety Is Your

Most Important Call.” Its latest slogan: “On the Road, Off the Phone.”

On its Web site, the CTIA offers safety tips including, “Do not engage in stressful or emotional conversations that might divert your attention from the road” and “Use a hands-free device for convenience and comfort.”

Those warnings do not acknowledge the many studies that show that hands-free devices do not eliminate risks. The industry says the research is inconclusive. One widely cited study, for example, shows that hands-free devices do limit the risk of talking while driving. However, that study, by the [Virginia Tech Transportation Institute](#), also showed that the act of dialing while driving poses serious risks.

Cellphone industry leaders also say studies have not shown a link between cellphone use and crashes. But little data exists on the number of crashes caused by drivers using cellphones because police either do not collect such data or started doing so only recently.

The industry says the number of reported accidents fell to six million in 2007 from 6.7 million a decade earlier — at the very time cellphone use has soared. Its critics say that the drop reflects the many safety improvements to vehicles and roads and that, besides, fatality rates have stayed fairly constant.

Ultimately, the industry has been motivated to educate customers because of good corporate citizenship, not because of research, said Mr. Largent, the head of the CTIA. “We don’t like to see our devices used in a way that puts drivers at risk,” he said.

The most aggressive education effort has come in recent months, focused on texting. “Texting or mobile device usage in a car is an issue on par with drunk driving itself,” said Daryl Evans, a vice president at AT&T, which has begun adding a sticker that reads “don’t text and drive” to the screens of nearly all new phones.

Verizon Wireless has put up billboards and is running television and radio spots. Last month, [Sprint Nextel](#) put out a news release urging customers not to text and drive and urging employees to agree not to do so. The CTIA has started a public service campaign to warn teenagers.

But why, critics ask, does the industry accept researchers’ findings on the dangers of texting when it found their studies lacking on the dangers of dialing or talking on the phone while driving?

“There’s probably little difference between making a phone call and texting,” Mr. Largent conceded. “If you have to take your eyes off the road, it can’t be a good thing.”

But he said the industry is not taking a position on whether states should ban dialing or talking while driving. “We’re not saying anything about that,” he said. “We’re going to let our consumers make their voices heard.”

For critics, it adds up to an effort by the industry over the years to appear responsible without hurting its core business. The companies’ warnings, critics argue, have not been loud enough to register (Over the last decade, the percentage of drivers talking on the phone at any given time has doubled, the government estimated).

“The landfill-sized accumulation of studies about the dangers of using these devices while driving should

have prompted a much more engaged posture on the part of the industry to be leaders to attempt to rein in this behavior,” said James E. Katz, the director for the Center for Mobile Communications Studies at Rutgers.

Other critics go further. “The real message was: continue to use our product,” said Mr. Ditlow, from the Center for Auto Safety.

He and others say a legislative battle in California shows that the industry’s actions speak louder than its words.

The Fight for California

“I am at an absolute loss,” Joe Simitian said, standing at the podium, facing fellow members of a California Assembly subcommittee.

It was April 23, 2001, the day Mr. Simitian, Democrat of Palo Alto, submitted legislation to require California drivers to use hands-free devices.

Mr. Simitian could not understand why major cellphone companies opposed his legislation, even though their educational materials urged drivers to use hands-free devices.

He cited such materials published by AT&T, Cingular and Sprint — companies that opposed the bill. “When using your Sprint PCS phone in the car, focus on driving, not talking, and use your hands-free kit,” Mr. Simitian said, reading from Sprint’s own materials. “Failure to follow these instructions may lead to serious personal injury and possibly property damage.”

Mr. Simitian, who seized on the issue after seeing dangerous behavior on the roadways, told his colleagues the legislation merely sought to codify “the very practices this industry has been promoting for the last several years.”

Verizon Wireless was the first wireless company to testify. Breaking with the other major companies, as it often has on this issue, it supported Mr. Simitian. Its representative called the Simitian legislation necessary because education was not enough.

Representatives from AT&T, Sprint and Cingular said their education efforts were working. Their lobbyists added other concerns: research did not show cellphone use as a major cause of accidents; wireless phones should not be singled out from other kinds of distractions like eating; and mobile phones were essential emergency tools.

The representative from AT&T said the legislation did not adequately define “hands-free device.”

Mr. Simitian saw a contradiction. “These are the folks who wrote the brochure and now tell us they don’t know what a hands-free device is,” he said.

The legislation did not make it out of committee, a result Mr. Simitian attributed to heavy company lobbying. In each of the next five years, major wireless companies opposed the same proposal in California, saying education was sufficient.

Companies also said they were looking out for consumers. They argued, for instance, that a hands-free law would provide an excuse for police officers to pull over minority drivers. There is “the very real possibility it will lead to unfair and discriminatory consequences,” Sprint Nextel wrote in a letter opposing the 2006 bill.

But that version passed and the law took effect in 2008.

The industry’s position has since changed. In a recent interview, Mr. Largent conceded that the opposition in California was “a mistake.”

“At the time, we were all operating on the science that was before us and the evidence we had,” he said.

Mr. Simitian, now a state senator, finds that position “disingenuous.”

“The science at the time was the science that caused them to publish brochures telling people to use hands-free devices,” he said.

And Mr. Simitian says the industry had ample evidence at the time that its education efforts were not working.

Mr. Largent conceded recently that the industry’s education efforts were inadequate. He added that if people say, “‘That’s not your position 10 years ago,’ I say, ‘You’re right.’ This industry continues to evolve. We think it’s evolving in the right direction.”

“The bottom line is safety. That’s our position.”

The Next Wave

The industry is evolving. It focuses less on marketing the car phone. But some ads promote a new generation of devices for cars.

A recent Sprint television ad shows a driver and four passengers in a car. The ad is for a mobile wireless service that allows people to use the Internet not just on phones but also computers. “Right now, five co-workers are working from the road using a ‘Mi-Fi,’ a mobile hotspot,” the voiceover says. One person is checking e-mail, another is streaming music, a third is using Mapquest and two are downloading and revising a presentation, the voice says.

Sprint says that despite what the voiceover says, not all five co-workers are actually working. “Throughout this television commercial, the driver has both hands on the wheel. He is not engaging in any unsafe behavior and is focused on driving,” Sprint says. The company also says the product’s instructions warn about distracted driving.

And the newest phones let people do many tasks at once. A recent ad in People magazine for the Nuvifone, sold by AT&T, shows a woman, apparently in the lawn-ornament business, explaining how she got directions from her phone while making a work call.

“I just tapped the address and followed spoken, turn-by-turn directions right to the front door,” it reads. “And I was able to take the call about pink palm trees — while still navigating.”

Mark Siegel, a spokesman for AT&T, said safety is paramount. “Your first priority in the car is driving safely,” he said. The marketing for the Nuvifone, he added, is “not intended to override our position.”

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