



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada
Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

Driven to distraction

There's nothing more distracting when writing about distracted driving than pouring over articles on distracted driving.

Putting any combination of the words about the subject into an Internet search engine, say, regulations, accidents, studies, countermeasures, can return up to 43 million hits. And browsing through even a handful of those articles can drive one to, well, distraction.

Driver distraction means different things to different people. Definitions and opinions vary on what it is, how dangerous it is, and how to fight it, which makes it difficult to compare apples to apples when it comes to interpreting study results and statistics.

But by any definition, distraction is anything that diverts attention away from the activities that are critical for safe driving toward a competing activity of some kind.

Obviously, any number of driver distractions have existed for decades. Lists of these distractors are ubiquitous: eating, grooming, map reading, talking with passengers, tending to children or pets, and fiddling with knobs, to name a few.

But there is growing concern about the distraction caused by bringing a variety of portable devices into the vehicle with us. And the cell phone is seen by many, including the users, as the ultimate driving distractor that incorporates a number of awareness-reducing activities into one powerful device: e-mail, the Internet, films and games, along with talk and text.

Even though conclusions on the dangers of cell phone use vary because studies differ in methodology, sample size, access to data, purpose of research and so on, there's no argument that using these devices while

driving reduces awareness of one's environment and increases the chances of a collision. Even the most conservative statistics on the role distracted driving plays in accidents and deaths each year are frightening.

But here's the thing. Even in the face of mounting evidence that distractions like texting dramatically increase the risk of accidents, people do it anyway. In a recent U.S. study, 98% of motorists who own cell phones and text regularly said they were aware of the dangers of texting while driving, yet three-quarters of them admitted to texting anyway. By some twist of logic, they believe that their own driving performance is not affected when they text behind the wheel, so while others shouldn't do it, they can.

Why drivers still engage in distracted driving practices and put themselves and others at risk is still somewhat of a mystery, and dozens of studies and surveys have tried to figure out why there is such a discrepancy between people's attitudes and behaviors.

The most common reasons people say they continue to text and drive? Others expect them to respond to a text as soon as they receive it; they want to stay connected to their friends and family; they feel anxious when they receive a text and don't respond right away; and they're afraid of missing out on something important.

So, while a combination of regulation, enforcement, and education have been effective in addressing other areas of road safety such as speeding, alcohol impairment, and seatbelt use, it doesn't seem to be working when it comes to distracted driving.

From what drivers themselves tell us, one reason for this may be that distracted driving is more than just a driving issue, it's



Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director

also a societal issue that results in part from lifestyle patterns and choices, with strong social factors governing what they think of as acceptable levels of risk.

So where do we go from here? Well, there's an app for that. The irony of using technology to protect us from technology isn't lost on me, but some apps hope to curb distracted driving by offering incentives for driving without texting or talking on the phone. Based on the data collected, you can collect reward credits which can be redeemed for products and discounts or donated to charity.

Or how about the coffee app in Japan? Toyota and coffee company Komeda have developed an app that rewards drivers with free coffee for driving without using a phone. If Timmies launched an app like that, we might see distracted driving accidents drop overnight.

Or, you can just forget all of this and follow the lead of my favorite comedian and political satirist Rick Mercer: admit you're a slave to technology, and depending on your level of addiction, hide the phone in the glove box, or put it in a baggie, wrap it in duct tape and lock it away. We all must do what we can to avoid the irony of stupid death by smartphone.

Joanne Ritchie is executive director of OBAC. E-mail her at jritchie@obac.ca or call toll free 888-794-9990.