

# The future of telematics looks bright: Lessons learnt from OnStar



**Frank Spillers** investigates OnStar, the winner of two Telematics Update Awards in 2003

**THE FUTURE OF** telematics systems looks bright. While many manufacturers are focusing on the possibilities of what the "connected car" offers, General Motors OnStar is sticking to the basics. Now into sixth generation technology, GM is keenly focused on lowering costs, increasing reliability and improving

The main question according to Huber is, "Can technology be adapted rapidly within a vehicle development lifecycle to stay relevant?"

GM appears to be clear about what telematics means to consumers. Based on its own research, OnStar is "comfortable and committed to a vision of a service model that should be

limiting choices and limiting the template."

OnStar has a live human operator component which is exquisite and offers a "high touch" feeling to GPS navigation with some five million calls per month. Yet, even by limiting choices and aiming for simplicity as OnStar has done with its famous three

functionality.

Since 1996, General Motors has blazed the trail with its OnStar system in what the company believes to be the most relevant services for consumers. According to OnStar president Chet Huber, "GM's OnStar system targets three consumer fundamentals: safety, security and peace of mind."

Since the first release of OnStar, GM has been looking to create the highest value for customers while at the same time finding ways to take advantage of the vehicle's electrical architecture.



voice-centric," says Huber. OnStar bases the voice-centricity of their product around the driver who they view as the person who spends the most time in a vehicle, on the whole, in North America.

Even as "driver distraction" awareness increases, more and more companies are seeking to identify the right make up of interface that caters to the physiological, cognitive and emotional "human factors". The right balance between tactile, speech and visual interface is an extremely delicate situation that must be explored, examined and tested exhaustively in order to capture consumer loyalty.

Huber: "Our research and testing shows speech interfaces to be less distracting and more responsive with the driver. Voice recogni-

tion button system, the speech interface still has problems. The other part of the interface is the speech engine, an automated attendant that is error prone and that requires the user to bark commands, leaving its human operator feeling uncomfortable with almost every interaction.

The problem is not OnStar, but merely a reflection of the state of speech recognition research and the inherent human tendency to feel superior to a machine that talks back. Safety and performance issues with hands-free systems are also being viewed as less than a perfect interface solution to the telematics opportunity as made evident by the US National Highway Transportation Safety Authority and others.

Despite the barriers to entry into the telematics arena, GM OnStar has led the way toward what was once a concept, to a reality that will without a doubt become an inevitability ten years from now. ■

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**Huber:** OnStar "committed to a vision of a service model that should be voice-centric"

tion has a bad history in the ugly environment of ambient noise. We try to limit voice navigation potential by

Frank Spillers is principal and co-CEO of Experience Dynamics, a leading human factors and design consultancy. Visit [www.experiencedynamics.com](http://www.experiencedynamics.com) for more details.