

Drive the car first, chatter later on cell phone

By Rick Maier

I have a new way of looking at the distracted drivers I see every day on our roads. Instead of a cell phone, I see an empty bottle of beer in their hand. And some drivers have consumed more than one.

It might be funny if it weren't so dangerous. Unlike alcohol, which makes most people drive more aggressively, cell phones often lead drivers to sit at green lights, take forever to make a turn, and over-react when braking. Both drinking and chatting lead to weaving and a general lack of attention to the road.

Some chatters drive as if operating their vehicle is distracting them from an important call. It's hard to navigate a busy highway while you're explaining over the phone to your spouse where to find your favorite spaghetti sauce in aisle 6 and breaking up a fight in the back seat.

Before you dismiss me as some curmudgeon blasting a trendy and popular practice, know that I too have a cell phone in my car. I keep it in the door pocket, ready for emergencies and an occasional urgent call (which I pull off onto the shoulder or sit at a light to make).

Having logged in about 1.2 million miles over 36 years without an accident, I think I'm a pretty good driver. But after several close calls using a cell phone while driving, I put the thing away.

Studies compare chatting and driving to drinking and driving, so I came up with a scale to compare the two:

- Hands-free chatting: the equivalent of one-half bottle of beer consumed
 - Hand-held phone: one full bottle consumed
 - Driving down Vineville Avenue, a bee buzzing around the car, applying makeup or other tense situations: add one more bottle
 - Nighttime or rainy conditions: add another bottle
 - Under 25: dude, gimme another brew
- (Note: studies show that seniors seldom chat and drive).

So a dad talking on a cell phone while driving the kids to school in heavy traffic might as well have had a couple beers with his Cheerios that morning. Not everyone that uses a cell phone has an accident, but not every person who has a few beers and gets behind the wheel has a wreck, either.

If you have one hand on the wheel and the other on the phone, how do you operate your turn signal to make a sudden lane shift? And who are all these chatty drivers taking to?

Please don't call me when you're stuck in traffic with lots of time on your hands. And isn't it a barrel of fun to ride in a car with someone on a cell phone?

I'm not advocating a ban on cell phones in cars. They may be the most important emergency device and time-saver to come down the road in decades. We just need to exercise more common sense.

Don't you agree that your greatest risk of getting killed or disabled is out there on the highway? And can you honestly deny that mobile phones impair your driving ability?

You may think the risks are worth it, but look at all the kids you're putting at risk. You may be a better driver chatting than the next person is with both hands on the wheel, but why dilute your attention. There are times when you need to drive for the other person too.

We've learned to not drink and drive. Can we postpone conversations for a time when it won't distract our driving?

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