



Tim Fraser, Calgary Herald Dennis Bailey with his Otto Driving Companion, which helped change his driving habits.

ON THE ROAD

Otto's an extra set of eyes

GREG WILLIAMS

Ever get the feeling you're not paying enough attention while driving?

There are so many distractions — stereo controls, kids in the back seat, drinks in the cupholders — making it easy to miss an important street sign.

In an ideal world, every driver would notice and obey every sign and signal. Unfortunately, it's not an ideal world.

Enter the Otto Driving Companion — better known as Otto — a unique high-tech gadget that acts as an extra-sensory device, if you will.

"This is just a phenomenal piece of equipment," says Calgaryan Dennis Bailey. Bailey owns and operates three Boston Pizza locations in the city's northwest, and he spends a great deal of time on the road between his restaurants.

"When you're on your way to work or heading back home, you're often thinking about what you have to do when you get there," Bailey says. "(Otto) gives you gentle reminders about what's going on around you."

Otto is a small black box, no larger than a radar detector, powered by the vehicle's cigar lighter or its own batteries. When placed on the dashboard of a vehicle, the device uses GPS signals to calculate the car's speed and location. A timely "heads-up" in the form of voice and lights helps alert a driver to various road conditions.

"(Otto) let's you know if you're exceeding the speed limit, approaching a red light camera or a hazardous intersection — even school or playground zones," Bailey says.

"It's changing my driving habits."

Bailey first heard about Otto through a friend in Winnipeg. His friend read an article about the device in a Winnipeg newspaper and sent the clipping to Bailey. As a self-confessed "gadget geek," Bailey contacted the manufacturer — Winnipegbased — and purchased it.

Otto is the brainchild of Frank Franczyk. Franczyk is the founder of Persentech Inc., a Canadian company that was founded in 2003.

Personal location technology of Franczyk's company, and he was interested in developing search-and-rescue devices.

But it was a World Health Organization report issued on April 7, 2004, that piqued Franczyk's interest.

"(The report) said that road safety was a very important public health issue," Franczyk says from his Winnipeg office. So Franczyk set out to develop a device that would complement existing road signage, and help reinforce good driving.

"Otto is a road safety device, and I think it could be placed alongside air bags and ABS as safety items that are located inside a vehicle," Franczyk says. "There are road safety devices that are found outside of a vehicle as well, such as road barriers, traffic signal lights and signs.

"There are a number of signs on the road, and they can often be confusing."

So, Otto provides a driver with a form of psychological feedback using both visual and oral cues.

Otto was first launched in Winnipeg and Ottawa, and then was expanded to include Calgary, Red Deer and Edmonton. Franczyk is currently at work mapping Vancouver and other areas. The Otto Driving Companion costs \$289.99 and includes coverage for your chosen "home" area. This price also includes free map updates for one year, after which a subscription fee of \$19.99 per year is charged. "Otto should help reinforce better driving behaviours," Franczyk concludes. For more information, check out www.myottomate.com.