

Winnipeg Free Press

ONLINE EDITION

Monday, April 19th, 2004

New device will urge: Hey driver, slow down

Local firm's CUE product helps in safety, navigation

Monday, April 19th, 2004

By Murray McNeill

THIS is one kind of back-seat driver most motorists probably wouldn't mind having along for the ride.

A fledgling Winnipeg technology firm is developing a new safety/navigational product that will alert motorists when they are exceeding the posted speed limit or are approaching a crosswalk, a school crossing zone or an intersection equipped with a photo-radar camera.

Instead of nattering in your ear, this little baby (it'll only be about five centimetres square and will sit on your dashboard or even fit in your shirt pocket) will emit a pleasant-sounding chime to alert the driver.

The idea behind the product, which will be named the CUE, is to keep motorists on their toes and reduce the number of traffic accidents, according to Frank Franczyk, president of the company developing it -- PerSen Technologies Inc.

Franczyk said he hopes to have the CUE on the market by this fall. It's the first in a series of new safety-related products PerSen Tech hopes to develop during the next two-and-a-half years, that will be based on global positioning satellite (GPS) technology.

Some, like CUE, will use outdoor GPS technology, Franczyk said, while others will be designed for use both indoors and out. For example, he wants to develop a small, personal-location device that can clip onto a piece of clothing and be used to track the whereabouts of a person (maybe a child or senior) or even a pet.

"As a parent with young children and as a son with aging parents, I often get anxieties about my family's safety and well-being," he explained. "Our vision is to alleviate such concerns by developing relevant technologies that are simple, easy to use and affordable and that provide greater peace of mind."

In the case of the CUE, a computer chip inside the battery-operated device will carry driver-related information about such things as the posted speed limit in different parts of the city and the location of areas like crosswalks and school crossing zones, Franczyk said. Using GPS data picked up from overhead satellites, the device will keep track of the motorist's location and alert him or her if they are approaching a crosswalk or school crossing zone, or are exceeding the speed limit for that area.

He said PerSen already has a prototype unit built and is preparing to road-test it.

A University of Manitoba graduate and co-founder of a former Winnipeg high-tech company SpectraWorks Inc., Franczyk said he got the idea for launching PerSen after attending a telecommunications conference in Geneva last fall and hearing about the abduction of nine-year-old Cecilia Zhang in Toronto and young Grand Forks woman Dru Sjodin, within a few weeks of one another. (Tragically, both were subsequently found dead.)

"It just hit me. Here (telecommunications-related products that promote personal security and community safety) are the growth industries," he said.

So in January of this year he launched PerSen and hired five local specialists, including computer hardware and software designers, an antennae designer and a market researcher, to help him design and develop the CUE.

Franczyk said most of the specialists are working on a contract basis for now, but he hopes to hire them as full-

time employees once PerSen begins selling its products.

Although he's already found a Winnipeg company that will manufacture the CUE products for PerSen, Franczyk said he and the marketing specialist are still trying to determine the best way to get the product to market. For example, they're looking at whether it would be best for PerSen to distribute the product itself or hire someone else to do it, he said.

The market research they're doing will also help to determine an appropriate price for the Cue units, he said, adding at this point all he knows for sure is that "it has to be affordable."

murray.mcneill@freepress.mb.ca

© 2004 Winnipeg Free Press. All Rights Reserved.