

City gadget to change how the world drives

By Bruce Owen

IT sits next to you and tells you when you're driving too fast.

No, it's not your spouse; it's Otto, a black contraption no bigger than a pocket calculator that its creators hope will revolutionize the way we drive.

Otto, the brainchild of Frank Franczyk and his partners, Jay Vanstone, John Graumann and Tom Cwikla, tells motorists when they're speeding, when they're coming up to a red-light intersection camera and when they're getting close to a pedestrian crosswalk.

It works through global positioning satellite technology and is about as simple to use as a digital camera, if not simpler.

A set of small indicator lights; blue for speeding, red for intersection camera and yellow for a crosswalk, warn the driver of what's up ahead. A blinking green light tells you you're receiving the satellite signal.



Otto, a Winnipeg invention, can tell you if you're speeding... in several different languages.

At the same time, users can choose a voice and language, via a computer download, so Otto can talk to them.

Languages available now are English, French, Spanish and Italian. More are coming.

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The Otto team, from left: operations manager Jay Vanstone, senior hardware and firmware developer Tom Cwikla, president Frank Franczyk and software and hardware engineer John Graumann.

Otto

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Otto has also been programmed to warn you if you're coming towards one of the city's top 10 most dangerous intersections. That information has been supplied by the City of Winnipeg's public works department.

The device goes on sale tomorrow for \$269.99 through Persentech Inc. (www.persentech.com). At first it will only be available online, but the company is looking for distributors.

Winnipeg is the first city where motorists can test-drive this one-of-a-kind technology.

Basically, Otto's tiny inside circuit board has memorized a map of Winnipeg and most of the surrounding area.

It knows the speed limit of every street. It knows where all of the city's 36 photo-enforcement intersection cameras are. It knows where every crosswalk is.

"You can call it what you like, but Otto is there to use its intelligence to help you about," Franczyk said. "It knows where you are and how fast you're going."

Franczyk and his partners think anyone with a vehicle would benefit from Otto — if the driver uses it properly — to avoid costly speeding tickets.

"My seven-year-old son can understand it and so can my 80-year-old father," he said. "The thing is you have to be in a frame of mind to accept it."

The benefit would mean safer streets as Otto-users drive according to the speed limit.

"Many people say they're not aware of the speed limit because there are too many signs," Franczyk said. "Otto heightens your awareness of what's going on around you without distracting you."

A number of devices have been loaned to friends and family to test out and get the word out about Otto, which can sit on your dashboard or steering wheel column.

Franczyk said he can't get them back.

"That's a good indicator," he said. "Everyone we speak to, they love it."

He added Otto also meets all Canadian laws and standards.

Otto has been developed using mostly private financing and is being launched in Winnipeg, as it's

the place Franczyk and the others call home.

"It comes down to your community and what's important for your community," Franczyk said.

"This is foremost a safety product."

Transport Canada has also expressed interest in it and plans are in the works for Ottawa to be the next Canadian city where Otto is launched. Transport Canada may use Otto in an upcoming study on speeding and safety.

Franczyk, president of Persentech, said Edmonton and Calgary will follow and then other cities in Canada and United States.

Franczyk said California alone has 28 million registered vehicles and hundreds of red-light cameras through the state with the fine for running a red at \$351 US.

Otto's capabilities will also be expanded as more units are sold.

For example, it will be able to chart your car's use if you lend it to your son for a night.

Franczyk said it can log how many kilometres were travelled and at what speeds.

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