



How to check email on the road without getting busted... or killed

Remember when the biggest fear cell phone users had was that their phones would give them cancer? Last we heard, the results were inconclusive... but as it turns out, a brain tumor is probably the least of your worries if you're driving while texting or talking on your phone.

In this issue of the Cartwheel newsletter, we'll cover some of the latest findings in the emailing-while-driving world, and share some helpful tips and apps to keep you out of trouble on the road.

Happy Driving!
Rafi and Josh
Founders, Cartwheel

The Research

Emailing or texting and driving are a deadly mix. That's been proven in a number of scientific studies. In fact, it may be more unsafe than drinking and driving. We learned that tidbit from a study by Car and Driver magazine. They rigged a car with a light to signal the driver to brake, and then tested the driver's reaction times while sober, reading an email, texting, and drunk. The results were brow-raising... if not unexpected. The worst result came while texting at 70mph – the car went a full 319 feet farther down the road than in the baseline test. When drunk driving at 70mph, the driver only put the car 17 feet farther down the road. You'd be better off downing a few martinis and getting in the car than answering an innocent "what's for dinner?" text from your spouse while you're behind the wheel. We don't recommend doing either.

We'll let you check out the rest of the results for yourself – you can read the article on Car and Driver's website, at http://www.caranddriver.com/features/09q2/texting_while_driving_how_dangerous_is_it_feature.

We all know the answer is self-control, but we wondered: can technology save us from ourselves? There are a few tips and apps out there that might be able to help.

Technology to the Rescue?

For the BlackBerry, we tried Vlingo Plus, a BlackBerry App World application that allows you to email and text anyone by speaking. The installation wasn't seamless, but after a few restarts of our BlackBerry, it seemed to go well. The fun started when we began sending messages. Our first message, sent to a coworker on the way to a tasty lunch of fried chicken, was "We're going to



get some fried chicken, and then going to eat some ice cream for dessert.” It came out as “Were going to get them right s*** (sic) and then were gonna eat some ice cream for dessert.”

While the results can be comical, the truth is that voice recognition through a BlackBerry isn't quite there yet. We're not sure if it's the software or the background noise, but few messages came out clearly, and some were just a joke. In terms of driving, even if you don't throw your BlackBerry out the window after a few minutes of using Vlingo, you'll still have to look at it quite a bit to get Vlingo to work properly... so it wouldn't make for totally hands-free usage while driving.

The application has a free trial that allows you to send 10 test messages and 10 emails, after which you pay the full \$17.99 retail price.

For the iPhone, we tested Voice on the Go (there's a version available for BlackBerry, too, but the registration process didn't work, so we quickly gave up). It offers a similar service to Vlingo's, though it's a bit more full-featured: you can send email or text messages, make phone calls, and listen to RSS feed updates. Voice on the Go synchs your contacts and calendars as well, though we didn't try it. Installation and setup were relatively easy, if a little clunky. It asked us for our email password so that it could send emails from our account... we did it for the sake of testing, but in general something like sharing an email password is something we'd never do. If you want to use an app that sends emails for you, you've got no other choice – but for us, it might be a deal-breaker.

Once you're set up it assigns you a phone number that you call in to when you want to use the app. An “interactive” menu speaks options to you, and you can speak your choices back. All in all, the experience worked... but it was frustrating. The system didn't always recognize our voice commands, which would drive us to distraction in a car. On the upside, the email transcriptions were surprisingly accurate – perfect, in fact. We were impressed. It might not be an application we'd use every day, or on a windy road... but in a pinch, we'd trust that our emails would get through and read accurately. It's free in the iTunes App Store for a 60-day trial.

An app called TXTBlocker, which works on most BlackBerry smartphones and a handful of other devices, claims to track your phone using GPS so that you can set it to turn off texting or calling in any “zone” that you choose. It starts at about \$10 per month (plus an initiation fee), and can control your phone only, or all mobile phones in your household. We didn't do any live testing on TXTBlocker – it hasn't been released yet, but it's scheduled to launch sometime this quarter. It seems like a noble idea, but we're leery of anything that can disable your phone remotely... and not so confident that something like a GPS-controlled “on-off” switch will work well. Imagine being a passenger in the car or on a train, and having your phone lock down because you're “going too fast to text.”



If Tech Can't Do It... the Government Will

The final verdict? We don't think technology is really ready to save us from ourselves when it comes to texting/emailing while driving. Until voice recognition, built-in car interfaces, and GPS catch up with it, sending written communication from the car is going to be dangerous. And, at least for now, it's up to us to keep things under control.

We saw a YouTube PSA that closed the conversation once and for all by demonstrating the deadly consequences of messing with texts in the car. Warning: it's graphic.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGE8LzRaySk>

If all that isn't enough, New York State is imposing a text messaging ban on all drivers (just like the handheld phone ban), effective November 1st, 2009. So whether or not we've convinced you... soon, it'll be the law.