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OPINION PIECE

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Industry must speak out against cellphones and driving

Most motorists do not realise the serious hazards of using their phones, says Pieter Streicher, Managing Director of BulkSMS.com.

According to Arrive Alive, an international survey amongst 837 drivers with cellphones found that almost half swerved or drifted into another lane, 23% had tailgated, 21% cut someone off and 18% nearly hit another vehicle while using the phone. In spite of these stats and laws to stop people talking or texting while driving, a large number still do.

Aside from our seeming addiction to our cellphones, perhaps a key reason for this lies in the legacy of our communication systems. Cellular technology has only been big news in South Africa for 15 years, meaning that a large proportion of current cellphone users are from the generations that were raised only having a phone at home.

This has two key implications. The first is that the older generation, say from 50 years old upwards, are accustomed to having to answer the phone after a few rings, or risk missing out on an important message or social opportunity. In their youth, even answering machines were not yet invented, so the need for the older generation to answer the phone or respond to a text without delay is deeply ingrained in their DNA. Their conditioning, therefore, makes it very hard for them to let the call go to voicemail.

The second implication is that they have not educated their children on the risks of driving while talking or texting. Part of this is because of their conditioning, but another part is that many people do not realise just how dangerous the use of a cellphone in a car is.

There was a study done at a university to qualitatively test the distraction levels of cellphone users. A clown on a monocycle—i.e. a very conspicuous and unusual sight—was planted on the campus. The reactions of the students to the clown were observed and surveyed. It was found that the majority of those talking on their cellphones did not even notice the clown. However, people who were walking in pairs did notice the clown, even though they were engaged in conversation.

Because the sound quality on a cellphone is not that good, plus the fact that you don't see the person's face, talking on a mobile phone requires a lot of attention. Few people realise this, and think that they can stay fully-focused on the road while using their phones. The stats and stories, unfortunately, paint a very different picture. SMSing while driving takes this to a whole new level. The amount of time the driver has to look away from the road is significant, and can have catastrophic consequences.

The onus, therefore, is on the industry to educate consumers on the dangers of combining cars and cellphones. This is particularly relevant in a society that is generally not overly risk-averse. Mobile network operators and others in the cellular industry need to take more responsibility to ensure safety while people use their products. Of course, the decision ultimately lies with the consumer, but industry must play its part.



The following tips have been provided by Arrive Alive, and are crucial to ensure the safety of drivers and passengers:

- When the phone rings, let it ring! It is better to use your phone's voicemail or even miss a call than to put yourself, your passengers or others at risk
- Use a hand-free or Bluetooth kit
- If you have to make a call on a hands free cellular phone, ask a passenger to dial or answer the phone for you
- Keep your calls brief
- If you expect a call to last longer than a few seconds, be on the lookout for a suitable spot to pull over
- Never take notes or jot down numbers whilst driving
- When using your hands free kit in heavy traffic, rather tell the person you will call back when it is safer
- Do not type or check SMS's when driving