

# NewsStand - The Future of Cars

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This article appeared in National Oil & Lube News, December 2011

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It was 1964 when I first started paying attention to what cars of the future would be like. The back of my Cheerios cereal box showed a picture of a car that needed no wheels and hovered across roads and ponds on a cushion of air. This futuristic mode of travel would be the new way in less than 20 years, they said. I'm curious what the Rust Belt tire manufacturers thought of this notion. I was twelve and gullible. Those engineers in the tire industry were a little more jaded about such sci-fi sentiments I suspect.

Here's another unfulfilled futurism. In the mid-1980s I read an article about ceramic engines that needed no lubricants at all. This innovative development would be unfolding right now and be the power plant of all new cars by 2020, the writer said. Ford and Toyota both had engineers working on this concept. An end to the oil change industry? It's not on any horizon I know of at the moment.

This summer a Popsci article titled "How Intelligent Cars Will Make Driving Easier and Greener" caught my attention because for some reason the idea of cars doing all the thinking for us humans seems a little disconcerting to me, at least when I consider how many times a month I have to call our tech support team. The article stated that not only will our cars predict what other traffic will do, they will also predict what pedestrians will do next.

This concept of intelligent cars isn't just a momentary blip in time. In October the 18th World Congress on Intelligent Transport Systems convened for five days to discuss the future of transportation in this country. Evidently these folks are earnest about the possibilities of connectedness and travel. There are plenty of companies involved in bringing this emerging technology into the automotive field.

According to the Pop Science story, Swedish automaker Volvo has been testing the concept of road trains in which a convoy of cars hitch up wirelessly like a wagon train. The lead car is on cruise control and the linked cars maintain proper distance from one another via sensor systems. It may not seem very practical for the New Jersey Turnpike but learning the capabilities of the new technologies aims to bring a payoff.

One goal of the World Congress on Intelligent Transport Systems is to improve safety and reduce traffic congestion. Smart cars will not only "talk" to each to avoid fender benders, they will even be able to anticipate the actions and reactions of pedestrians. According to a BusinessWire announcement Ford Motor Company Executive Chairman Bill Ford Jr. said, "We need to view the automobile as one element of a transportation ecosystem and look for new ways to optimize the entire system. We need cars that can communicate with each other and also with the world around them to make driving safer and more efficient."

To be honest, I'm not sure what to make of all this high tech gadgetry. I recently spent six hours talking to tech support in India in an attempt to get my HP computer to communicate with my HP printer, and the issues are still not all resolved. And what about those Toyota crashes involving runaway acceleration? They claim it's a floor mat issue, but what happens when our cars decide on their own that they like racing, too?

I'm grateful for the many benefits technology has given us. But when you look at what it costs to fix a driver's side door window because the electronic switch doesn't work (over \$400), it starts to concern me where all this is headed.

No discussion of the future of cars is complete without asking about the role electric cars will play in our future. The pressure is on to adopt alternatives to the internal combustion engine. Green is in.

When it comes to being green everyone talks a good game, but when a suggestion is made that we'd have less waste oil and packaging to dispose of with extended drain intervals, suddenly everything gets awkward.

There are currently tens of millions of cars on the road telling to their owners when to change their oil and it's seldom at three thousand miles. Why not encourage a premium synthetic motor oil so that whatever distance customers go between oil changes their cars will be protected? What happens when an engine decides to give its owner the silent treatment or starts to avoid oil changes the way people avoid dentists or annual check-ups?

A synthetic solution will give motorists peace of mind no matter what mood their car is in.

