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# Hands Off Hands-Free Devices

**Press Contacts:**

Peter Sadler, ICC/Unitech  
Phone: (312) 829-2525  
Fax: (312) 850-8755  
[psadler@iccus.com](mailto:psadler@iccus.com)

Ken Krause, Tech Image Ltd.  
Phone: (847) 632-0040, x228  
Fax: (847) 632-1841  
[Ken.Krause@techimage.com](mailto:Ken.Krause@techimage.com)

By Stephen M. McClure  
Special to the Chicago Tribune  
*Published August 31, 2001, 4:44 PM CDT*

Last week, nationally syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts called for an outright ban of cell phone use in moving vehicles.

He presented a number of arguments, or rather quoted the arguments of others. His solution sounds great in theory. Remove the phones and you remove distractions, and thus increase safety, he says. It's quick, it's decisive, and it goes after a visible target.

Of course, back in the '20s, that's what they thought Prohibition would do with alcohol, and we all know how much that did for Chicago's reputation.

Once a genie is out of the bottle, it's hard to put him back in again. There are now more than 100 million cell phones in use in the United States. A study by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration found that at any given time, at least 500,000 are being used in a moving vehicle.

The bottom line: You won't stop people from talking. Just as in the '20s, you'll simply make lawbreakers of ordinary citizens.

In the interest of fair disclosure, I must state that I have a vested interest in this issue that extends far beyond how I use my time in the parking lots that Illinois is trying to pass off as expressways. I'm chief operating officer of International Components Corp., the Chicago-based company that makes the PowerPlus hands-free digital speaker phone system. I'm also a husband and father, which means safety is a primary concern for me.

People are using research to conclude whatever they want to conclude. Pitts, for example, was quick to point out the recent study by the University of Utah that suggested that talking on a cell phone is distracting whether it's hand-held or hands-free. What he didn't point out is that the researchers themselves said their study group was too small to be considered a scientific sample. In other words, their research is about as valid as if you and I did it with our friends and neighbors.

In addition, they did it under simulated conditions; another study by NHTSA showed that reaction times differed between simulated and real conditions, probably because the test groups take examinations a lot more seriously when they're actually on the road.

Pitts also didn't bother quoting a General Motors study of hands-free cell phone users that ranged from October 1996 to May 2000. During that time, there were only two accidents out of 8.1 million calls, and there was no evidence linking the two accidents to the cell phone conversations.

There are a lot of distractions when you're driving a vehicle, both inside and out. Look around the next time you're driving and see how many people are eating a fast-food meal, putting on mascara, searching for a CD or reading.

You can't legislate against them all, because ultimately you can't legislate common sense. Each driver is different, with different capabilities, and it's up to the individual to understand his or her limitations.

As for driving and talking, there are three basic options (again, I have strong opinions about this because of the products my company sells):

- Hold the phone in your hand, or cradle it between your ear and shoulder. These things are, without a doubt, a safety hazard. If you're doing them now, you should seriously consider changing your habits. Having both hands free to drive the car is pretty much lesson one at any driving school.
- Use ear buds or a one-side headphone device. It's better than hand-held, but still has some big drawbacks. Unless you keep the device on or in your ear at all times, you will spend some time fumbling with it before you can even worry about answering the phone. If you have to turn your head, an ear bud might stay behind, pulling out of your ear, and perhaps causing a major distraction as you try to save it. The biggest drawback is that it still places the conversation "inside" your head, which can cause you to lose concentration if the topic becomes too intense.
- A speakerphone makes the most sense because it requires the least effort and is most like a natural conversation. If you purchase a product with a good microphone, strong noise suppression, and enough volume to hear without straining, it shouldn't be any more distracting than talking to a passenger in the car. Most of us can handle that.

Today's society is a very mobile one, with a pace of life that demands we use our time effectively. Unless we can get everyone to agree to cut the pace in half, using cell phones in moving vehicles will remain a priority for everyone from road-warrior salespeople and business execs to soccer moms.

The goal shouldn't be more unenforceable, but politically expedient, legislation. It should be educating people to make intelligent, responsible choices. We need to learn from our past. Prohibition of something people want didn't work back in the '20s, and it won't work today.

*Stephen McClure is chief operating officer of International Components Corp., a Chicago-based manufacturer of digital speakerphones and battery charges for cell phones.*

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