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How add-on telematics will affect the aftermarket

By cfrey

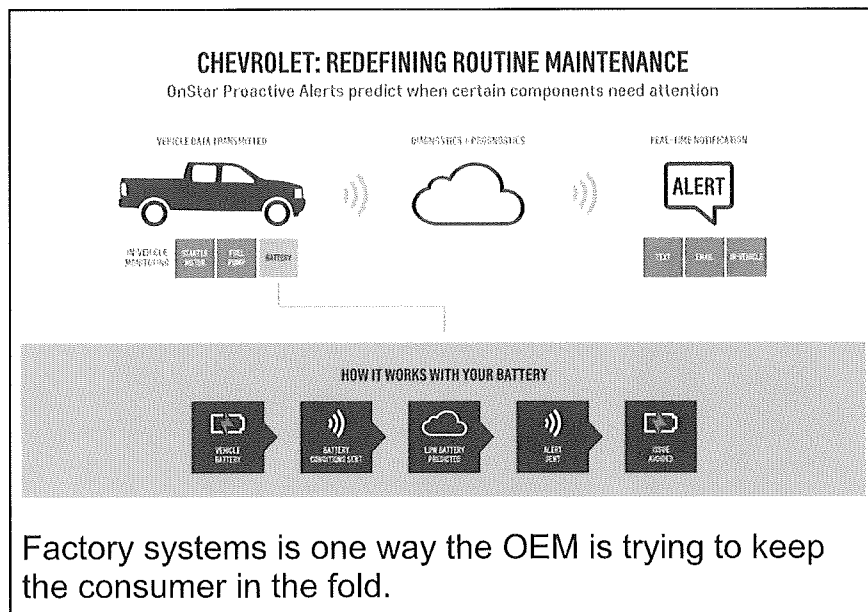
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Telematics seems to have become a buzz word the last several years in the automotive aftermarket. Telematics really aren't new to the automotive world, but the technology has progressed to the point where aftermarket options have become available. As with any technology, there are both positive and potentially negative ramifications. So let's take a deeper look at telematics, the options available today and the potential future for telematics systems.

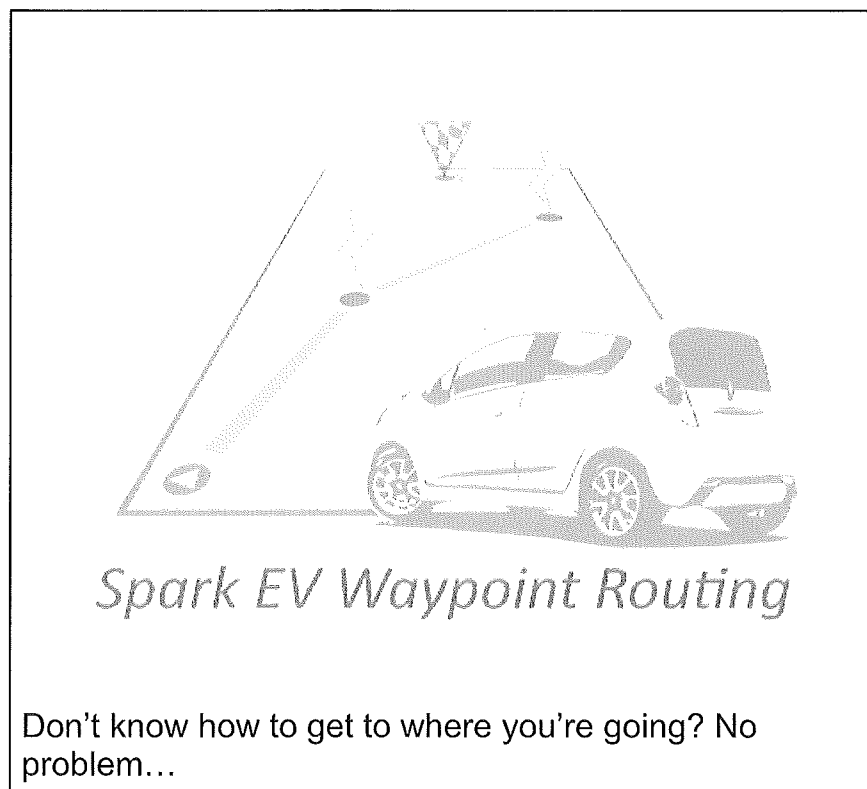
What is telematics?

The definition of telematics listed in Wikipedia is pretty long and involved. It states, "Telematics is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses telecommunications, vehicular technologies, road transportation, road safety, electrical engineering (sensors, instrumentation, wireless communications, etc.), and computer science (multimedia, internet, etc.)." For this article, I'll focus on the telematics system's ability to access the vehicle's onboard diagnostic data and relay that information. It's important to note that all systems are not created equal in their ability to relay data. Don't mistakenly assume that remote diagnostic systems can necessarily access all of the information you could get if connected directly to the vehicle with a diagnostic tool either, as this can be far from the truth.



As I mentioned, telematics systems are not new to the automotive industry. In fact, General Motors introduced the first version of OnStar on some model year 1997 Cadillac vehicles and Mercedes-Benz introduced their first telematics system in model year 2000 as Tele Aid (later called mbrace, and now mbrace2). Those early systems were a far cry from what we see on vehicles today. Their features were primarily focused on safety, possibly some remote guidance, and some limited communications. Fast forward to 2017, and oh how things have changed. OEM systems are now providing communications that could only be dreamed of in the past. The safety and guidance functions have been expanded and communication functions have virtually exploded. Systems are now able to provide automated diagnostic reports, maintenance reminders, in-vehicle internet hot spots, and on and on and on. In fact, remote updating of the onboard control modules (known as over-the-air updates) is even starting to get close to becoming a reality.

The main question that comes to my mind with these systems is: How can they be leveraged by aftermarket shops to better service their customers? The reality is the systems likely have all been setup with defaults to try to drive customers to the dealerships for service. Typically when a customer has an active subscription, any trouble code notifications that are sent to the customer will also be sent to the dealer closest to the customer's address on record with the telematics provider. Of course the customer likely has the right to deny that automated dealer notification, but if that's even an option in the contract it's unlikely the customer knows. Does that mean you need to offer the customer an aftermarket option on top of their existing OEM system to be able to have that same access? Fortunately, the answer is likely almost always going to be no. If you choose to start pursuing these vehicles, there are a few options I'd recommend considering. Keep in mind, even though your customers may be bringing in older vehicles for service, it doesn't mean they don't also have newer vehicles at home that may be equipped with telematics. In other words, if you are going to go after this market, you should advertise it to all of your customers.



The first and simplest option is to just offer your assistance in interpreting the information that is already being sent to them. Make the customers aware that you are willing and able to review any notifications they may receive from the OEM. To make it convenient for the customer, provide them with an email address they can forward the reports and/or notifications to. Of course you need to be prepared to actually follow up on any items sent, which could get time consuming, so be sure you are prepared for the volume you may receive.

The second option is slightly more invasive on the front end, but would be more convenient for the customer in the long run and could really differentiate your level of customer service. Most of the OEM telematics systems can be set up to send notifications to more than one email address. You could provide your customers with a dedicated email address they can add to their account, which would direct those notifications directly to your shop. The key again would be follow up. If you receive notifications but don't act on them, it could backfire. If handled correctly, however, it could give you an opportunity to go above and beyond your customer's expectations and help them proactively manage their vehicle concerns.

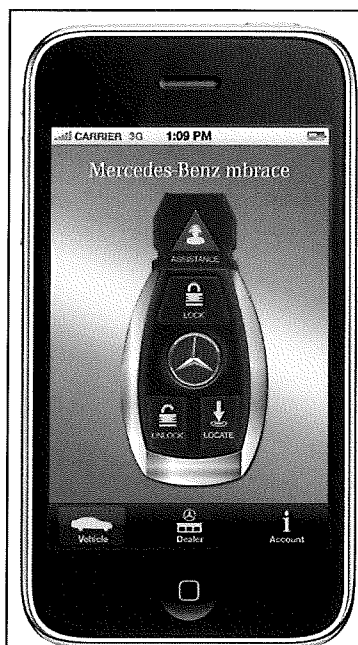
Aftermarket options

In addition to the various original equipment telematics options, there are a growing number of aftermarket options. I think of these "add-on" systems as primarily falling into one of two large categories based on their primary function. The categories I group them into are systems designed primarily for safety purposes, and systems designed primarily for remote diagnostic purposes.



General Motors introduced OnStar FMV (For My Vehicle) in 2011. This was one of the earlier add-on systems that I would classify as having a safety focus. The system had some of the core OnStar features but don't mistakenly think the OnStar name means it could do everything the OEM version did. It had the ability to be used on a wide variety of makes/models outside of GM, however it was not really an embedded system like the OE

version. In other words, features such as remote diagnostics and diagnostic reports were not available. Those features required a more embedded system than the FMV. That left it with primarily safety features such as automatic crash response, navigation (audio), stolen vehicle assistance, emergency assistance and hands-free calling. General Motors ended production of the FMV around 2014. Since then, safety-related add-on systems have moved more toward monitoring the drivers' safety habits rather than automated crash response. Most have the ability to provide driving style/habit reports to help encourage improved behavior. Some of them even have video cameras that will capture unsafe behavior. Lytx DriveCam is one example of an advanced camera-based system. This system has both inward- and outward-facing cameras to record what's happening any time the vehicle is moving. While the camera is constantly "rolling," it doesn't save the footage until an incident triggers it.



Telematics-based key-fob prevents lockouts

The driving conditions that trigger a recording can be somewhat customized by the local administrator of the system. This system is so advanced that it can even record videos and send real-time alerts when the driver is exhibiting potentially unsafe behavior while driving. These behaviors can include things such as eating, using a handheld cellular phone, etc. Insurance companies have recognized the value of the safety-monitoring type telematics. In fact, most of the major insurance companies have some type of system available currently and offer discounts to their drivers who use them. The theory is that drivers will improve their safety (thereby reducing the risk to the insurance company) if they are reminded when they are doing something unsafe. Some of these devices are simply apps that can be installed on cellular phones such as the Allstate Drivewise system. Others, such as the Progressive system called Snapshot, require an adapter that plugs into the onboard diagnostic port. Those adapters then connect wirelessly to your cellular phone so the captured data can be uploaded to the insurance company.

For add-on remote diagnostics, two units immediately come to my mind for the automotive market — the Delphi Connect and the Golo from Launch Tech USA. Both of these devices plug into the OBD port on the vehicle and both tap into the onboard controllers, but beyond that they work very differently.

The Delphi Connect unit is available from various cellular providers. As you would likely expect, since it's distributed by cellular providers, it connects directly to the cellular network. Because it interfaces with the OBD port, it is able to access information related to trouble codes, etc. and provide a vehicle health report similar to some of the OEM systems. The cellular connection also allows it to provide vehicle tracking, geo fencing, automated alerts and notifications, and many other features. There are even models available that provide 4G LTE hot spot functionality for the vehicle. This unit is obviously very consumer focused, which means it also comes with features that, as a shop owner, may not be as helpful as you'd like. For instance, Verizon advertises the benefit of "Know Before You Go," suggesting the vehicle owner can know what their vehicle needs before taking it to a repair facility. Obviously that can lead to customers questioning the cost of diagnostics, which can already be challenging enough.



golo Business Manager

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- Improve customer satisfaction
- Attract more customers

Car owner

- Get help with remote diagnosis
- Vehicle maintenance reminders
- Wide range of vehicle services information
- More trustworthy service providers to choose

Mechanic

- Small-size & easy to carry
- Technician skill security
- More economical for the software
- Better customer experience

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GOLO allows remote vehicle access from the Launchtech scan tool

The Golo from Launch Tech USA is a much different concept. This unit doesn't have its own cellular connection. Instead, the adapter connects to the OBD port of the vehicle and then connects to a smartphone (Android or Apple) to send data. The differences, however, don't stop there. Golo isn't really designed as a "do-it-yourself" diagnostic tool. Instead, it provides remote access for a technician to be able to access the vehicle remotely, using the same scan tool they would use if the car was in the shop. This concept provides a great option to support your customers. If a customer of yours with a Golo installed in their car experiences a check engine light the basic scenario would be:

- Check engine light comes on
- Customer activates the Golo app on their phone
- Customer contacts your shop (which can even be done through the app)
- Your technician connects to the customer's vehicle using a Launch Tech scan tool
- Your technician can read codes, view live data, and even clear codes if needed

This gives shops the ability to assist the customer even if they aren't near your shop. It also gives you the ability to gain more data that can help with scheduling of that vehicle by answering questions such as does the car need to come in right away or can it wait for a few days? Or how much time should you block off of the schedule initially?

An exciting future

With all of the potential benefits of telematics it's easy to forget about the potential downside to these systems. While the OBD port seems perfect for both powering up and providing data to the telematics interface, it's important to remember what the OBD port was designed for — diagnostics. In other words, when anything is plugged into that port, it's entirely possible the vehicle controllers will recognize that and go into a diagnostic mode. That could result in communication differences among onboard controllers due to signal prioritization changes, etc. In fact, General Motors has a Technical Service Bulletin out from several years ago (#08-08-46-004A) related to issues with the OnStar automated reporting if any other devices are left plugged into the OBD port. I would highly recommend utilizing your service information

system to research any TSBs such as this before installing or recommending an OBD connector interfaced unit for any of your customers.

The future of telematics and/or remote diagnostics is certain to be exciting. It's highly likely both OEM and aftermarket solutions will continue to develop with additional functionality. While I don't know exactly where this technology will be in 3-5 years, I wouldn't be surprised if the onboard system becomes somewhat more "open." That would allow non-OEM applications to significantly expand their functionality. While the OEMs may not like the idea of opening up their systems, I think consumer pressure will overcome that. In the commercial vehicle industry that network openness has been increasing for years (and is continuing to evolve). The network on those vehicles is actually designed to allow the third party interfaces to connect without negative ramifications (within limits obviously). No matter how much further the systems develop, one thing is almost definite. If you can help your customers leverage a telematics system (OEM or aftermarket) to improve their ownership experience, save time and feel safer driving their vehicles, you'll likely see a gain in your local market share along with increased customer loyalty.

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