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# Web access for autos goes on the road

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By **Chris Woodyard, USA TODAY**

The personal computer has finally gone to driving school.

Three decades after they began appearing on desktops, PCs are about to start showing up in vehicles. They will let people check e-mail, avoid traffic jams or make restaurant reservations via the Web while on the job or at play.

The idea could prove especially popular among younger drivers. A September survey found that 14% of prospective buyers under 30 want in-car e-mail and Web access, more than double the number who said they wanted it in 2004, says CNW Marketing Research.

"We're going to see a lot of explosive changes," predicts Robert Wray, CEO of StreetDeck, a maker of mobile commuting software. Some of the technology will be showcased at a trade show opening today in Las Vegas.

Automotive PCs will connect through regular cellular phone signals. But makers expect the in-car systems to eventually move to Wi-Max — high-powered Wi-Fi that blankets broadband access across cities — over the next few years.

Putting PCs on wheels are:

- **Ford Motor.** F-Series pickups can now be equipped with FordLink, which went on sale last month, as a \$2,999 option. The PC is aimed at contractors who want to order building materials or send e-mail from the cab.

A rugged PC fits into a cradle in front of the dash. The PC, which runs Microsoft's XP software, can play Internet radio and MP3 music files.

- **KVH Industries.** The TracNet 100 system, introduced in September, displays Web pages on a vehicle's navigation and video screens and creates a wireless connection in the car. The cost is about \$2,000 for the hardware and \$79 monthly for the connection.

Web access in vehicles "is going to be as common as cellphones," predicts Ian Palmer, executive vice president of KVH.

- **Microsoft and Azentek.** The software giant, working with hardware maker Azentek, will offer consumers a choice of two small PCs next year.

One is a small portable, a little bigger than a Cracker Jack box, that can be carried around and temporarily popped into the dash where the stereo is located. The other, a more powerful model, is installed in the dash. Prices for both will be upward of \$2,000.

Drivers will need to exercise safety. They won't be allowed to view their e-mail and other distracting functions unless the car is stopped. But that problem is being solved as voice-command systems become more widespread.

For instance, Canadian firm Intelligent Mechatronic Systems next year will offer its iLane cradle for personal digital assistants. The cradle uses a synthesized voice to read arriving e-mail, calendar reminders and text messages.

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