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REGION@ REPORT



Americans may love their *Bluetooth* enabled mobile phones, headsets and other devices, but they are changing their usage patterns because of new and impending laws as well as new applications and product capabilities. In the United States, legislation aimed at reducing mobile phone use and text messaging while driving is perhaps the most prominent trend, influencing everything from product development to user behavior and rate of adoption.

In the past few years, several states, including Pennsylvania, Maryland, California, Illinois, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey and Washington,

have begun requiring that drivers use hands-free devices when using cell phones, and Hawaii and Oregon joined them this year, according to the latest data from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS). Many counties also have instituted their own bans.

Laws prohibiting text messaging while driving also are gaining momentum throughout the United States. So far, 19 states, the District of Columbia and Guam have banned text messaging while driving, and novice drivers in nine other states are banned from texting, according to IIHS data. That leaves few places in the United States where some kind of mobile phone or text messaging law is not in effect.

As such, consumers are changing how they interact with their phones while on the road. According to Boston-based Strategy Analytics, only 26 percent of *Bluetooth* wireless headset owners in the United States use their devices regularly, down from 43 percent in 2008. One reason for the shift is that hands-free legislation is driving interest in integrating *Bluetooth* technology into vehicles for hands-free calling as well as music, navigation and other information access.

Major U.S. vendors, expecting this trend to continue, are expanding their *Bluetooth* enabled vehicle systems to create a more robust hands-free experience for drivers. Ford Motor Company and Best Buy, for example, are working together to promote Ford's Sync on-board voice-activated radios. These systems link with MP3 players and mobile phones via *Bluetooth* technology and are operated by voice command. Sync also allows for traffic and weather updates, as well as navigation.

Another factor in declining headset use is consumer demand for smaller, sleeker headsets. As John Canali, an analyst in Strategy Analytics global automotive practice, points out, consumers are concerned about whether it's fashionable in American culture to wear a headset or earpiece.

Manufacturers of *Bluetooth* enabled headsets are confident that the market for such devices, although changing, will remain healthy as products evolve. "The fact that people use cell phones and smartphones more than ever, combined with cell phone bans and different preferences for different users, is driving us to create more specialized types of *Bluetooth* headsets," says Liz Hamren, vice president of product marketing at Plantronics Inc., a major *Bluetooth* wireless headset manufacturer.

Plantronics' two newest models cater to what Hamren says are the two primary requirements of American users – sleek styling and a small form factor. While some users want to make a statement with their headsets, others want them to fade into the background. Plantronics addresses those challenges with the Voyager Pro, designed for those interested in style, and the Discovery 975, for those who want something more discreet.

Other manufacturers are catering to Americans' tastes in headsets as well. Miniature headsets include the Nextlink Bluespoon 5G, Motorola's H5 Miniblue and Nokia's BH-800, and high-style models include the Jawbone Prime, LG Prada and BlueAnt Z9.

As for where *Bluetooth* technology adoption in the United States is headed, only one thing is certain. The trend toward more hands-free legislation will continue, influencing product design, adoption and use for years to come.

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Time to Let Go

With widespread hands-free legislation in effect, Bluetooth SIG members are looking to create more options for U.S. consumers.

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