

The Thin White Line

Improving Car Safety One Piece of Paper at a Time

The North American car market is massive. There are over 170 million cars in use on our continent alone and, due to the dangers associated with these fast-moving, heavy steel objects, an equally vast network of safety mechanisms has been built to protect us all. Although some may not like it, this framework was designed alongside the ever-evolving car industry in an effort to keep consumers, technicians and pedestrians as far out of harm's way as possible.

Just think about the number of safety inspections a car goes through on its way from the manufacturer to your driveway. On top of product development, including crash and road tests, the manufacturer will conduct at least some kind of quality assurance testing for safety before it gets sent to dealerships around the world. In order to even be released on the market it must meet national and regional policies regarding safety mechanisms, emissions limits, engine size, and a host of other subjects.

Once it's on the market there are a wide range of consumer protection agencies, consumer review websites and magazines that do their own assessments. One of the things they look for is whether or not the manufacturer paid close attention to widely accepted safety standards. They also conduct their own tests for braking distance, collisions and rollovers.

Even in the hands of the driver there is an ever increasing list of laws that were created in an attempt to promote safety. Traffic laws, regular safety inspections, emissions testing, and the notorious "cell phone" bylaw that is cropping up in various municipalities across the continent are all designed to encourage drivers to be more safe.

Most people consider this complex web of laws and safety regulations to be cumbersome and unnecessary, but where would we be today if seatbelts weren't mandatory? How many more fatalities or serious injuries would be recorded if there were no school zones or speed limits? Of course, one could argue that some laws impinge on personal freedoms, but the point is that driving safely isn't something people do naturally. The laws exist to protect the broader population.

Also, by making safety a priority the government has encouraged industry to become more innovative when it comes to their own design. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) recently began studying whether to make collision warning systems and lane departure warning systems mandatory. Regardless of the outcome, it's clear that the automotive industry is responding to our society's rigorous position on safety: they are the ones developing these new solutions.

Rather than trying to buck against the "system" drivers and car owners that understand the regulations and the paperwork, they are actually able to benefit more than those who don't. The evolution of communications technology over the past decade is also now lending itself to this bureaucracy, making the entire safety framework much more effective and user-friendly.

The "thin white line" enforced by traffic cops, mechanics, industry regulators, and the government at large is actually a very effective system for ensuring that drivers are more cautious about how they use their vehicles. Often, it's the paperwork, the laws, and the regulations that make driving so much safer for everyone involved.

How to Get a Vehicle History Report

While buying a used car, my girlfriend and I worried about the safety of the vehicle from a historical perspective. Had it been in any accidents? Had it sustained any major damage from the elements? Was it ever used as a taxi or rental car? The salesman brought us out a vehicle history report and it answered most, if not all, of our questions.

All of the items that appear in a vehicle history report can give you an idea of how safe the vehicle is. If a vehicle has been written off or severely damaged, then there is a higher risk of it requiring more maintenance to ensure overall safety. The frame of a car - or its chassis - can also show signs of fatigue and can weaken over time if it has been subjected to high impacts such as collisions or other kinds of accidents. Also, any car that has been used frequently, like a taxi or a rental, will be a more risky investment in terms of mechanical safety.

Thankfully, the report on the four-door sedan my girlfriend and I wanted to buy was relatively clean. The odometer had never been tampered with and it had never been stolen. It was owned by only one other driver and there had been no accidents reported. The salesman, wanting to really make sure we felt the car was safe, explained to us how to get our own vehicle history report.

Every car has a Vehicle Identification Number, or VIN. This is usually located at the base of the windshield or on the driver side door jam. It is a 17-digit number, unless the car was manufactured before 1981, in which case there is no information in any database for it. (If that's the case you may want to take the car to a trusted mechanic to do a top to bottom inspection.)

Write down the VIN, head online and just search for "vehicle history report" or "vehicle title search". The report generator will search a database, using the car's VIN, and provide you with the vehicle report either by mail or electronically.

That's it! It's very easy and shouldn't cost you more than thirty dollars. As an extra step you can search online for consumer safety reviews as well as crash test reviews. These are a good, impartial source of information concerning the safety of most cars.

The vehicle history report is one major piece of bureaucracy that exists, almost purely to promote safe driving practices. When a car is on the market waiting to be sold, this bit of paper can help the buyer (and the seller) arrive at a more accurate price range for the vehicle. When the car is owned, the report encourages the owner to drive more cautiously: it's a lot harder to sell a car or get a good price for it if it's been in an accident.

Emissions Testing - It's the Law

When it comes to public safety it sometimes seems as though the government works at a snail's pace. It's the nature of the beast though, as regulations and laws take a long time to develop and even longer before the public starts to respect them. Nobody is ever really happy about having to change their habits but when it comes to driver safety no compromise is too insignificant.

When I started working my first job after college I drove this one road every day. It's a long one, with smooth curves and some not too gentle hills, that winds its way down the valley before reaching the city. It's rarely busy, except during rush hour, and then of course you've got a few bottlenecks. But even then, every road coming out of this city is backed up during rush hour.

There are only a few drawbacks to this drive: it can get a little scary in rough weather and it's always got at least one cop hidden somewhere on it - so you can't speed when it's nice out.

One night I'm driving home with my girlfriend after a party and we get stopped by a roadside check. As we slowed to a stop, the officer leaned forward, in through the driver's side window.

"How're you kids doin' tonight?" he said.

After asking us whether or not we'd had anything to drink (to which, thanks to good planning, I hadn't) he began to examine the lower corner of my windshield. I realized he must be looking for the annual safety test sticker. I relaxed a bit with the knowledge that I had just gotten my safety test done the day before.

He stood up and asked, "Ever had your emissions test done, son?"

"My what?" I asked. He proceeded to explain to me what an emissions test was and how not having one was breaking the law.

"Public safety, you know?" he said as he ripped the yellow sheet of paper, worth hundreds of dollars, off his little metal notepad and handed it to me through the window.

Of course, I paid the ticket and got the test done. Fortunately, the car was up to standard and didn't need anything replaced or repaired in order to get it back on the road. I was worried because I had heard that some of my buddies paid an arm and a leg just to make sure their car was safe to drive after they got their emissions test done.

The funny thing was I never got mad. How could I? The government was finally reacting to public demand for cars to be less harmful on the environment. They had succeeded in reducing pollution by making the air quality safer. It's not something that most of us would do on our own: we don't have the money to get a hybrid, and most guys my age wouldn't be caught dead driving any of the newer compacts.

Now that I know about emissions testing and how often I need to get it done, I'll avoid getting dinged with a fine in the future. Plus, I can sleep a little bit better knowing that I'm not contributing as much to

pollution and helping improve the health of others all at the same time. It's just one more example of how a driver's knowledge about safety regulations can keep everyone much safer.

Emissions Test - The Basics

After getting a ticket for not having an emissions test done I was determined to find out what, exactly, I needed to do to avoid fines in the future. I also wondered what the mechanics look for when they conduct an emissions test and how that contributes to lower levels of pollution. I figure, by knowing more about the whole process I can keep myself and others safer.

So, first off, each state in the U.S. and each province or territory in Canada has their own standards for emissions testing. I happened to get mine done in Ontario, but if you want to know what the standard is in your area then you can Google "emissions testing" and add the geographic location - state or province - in which you've registered the car.

In most cases, an emissions test needs to be conducted either annually or once every few years. In Ontario, emissions are regulated through the Drive Clean program and you must get your car e-tested (emissions tested) once every five years, although if you're driving a larger truck you may still be required to get it tested annually. Ontario's Ministry of the Environment has contracted out this testing to privately owned garages so it's easy to find a place to get this done and some mechanics even offer savings if you get a safety test done at the same time.

After paying a hefty fine, I wanted to know how such a test could actually reduce the amount of pollution my car puts out. So, when I went to get my test done, I asked the mechanic what, specifically, they looked for.

"Well, every car gets a gas cap pressure check - no matter what." Said the mechanic.

"And what's that checking for?" I asked.

"Make sure none of the fuel vapours are escaping," he turned towards me, like he was revealing a secret. "See, fuel vapours can leak out of your car and then sit around to become what they call ground level smog.

"We also check your brakes, we check for leaks, and throw your old beauty up on the dynamometer where we run her for a bit and test the gasses coming out the tailpipe."

"What do you mean by gasses?" I asked. "Isn't there supposed to be something coming out of the exhaust?"

"Well, we're testing the levels of various chemicals that make up that 'something'. In particular we test for carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide, and various other hydrocarbons that contribute to pollution" he said.

The mechanic went on to explain that getting this checkup done would save me money in the long term.

"You stand to spend lots more cash on gas if you don't get your exhaust system checked like this every so often."

By making emissions testing a law the government of Ontario has stirred some controversy. Several leading environmentalists critique the regulations, saying that the heavy cost of the bureaucracy outweighs the benefit of the program. However, the provincial legislators have clearly taken a step in the right direction. Even our idle conversation turns to these broad issues. The lawmakers have succeeded in establishing public health and safety as a priority - and that can't be a bad thing.

Demerit Points - An Effective Deterrent

The phone continued to ring as I waited for the auto insurance company to pick up. Standing in our kitchen I was able to see out our window and into the driveway, where our brand new car sat glistening in the sun. It was a base model four door and, although brand new to my girlfriend and I, was actually a used car we had just bought.

At the moment I was about to begin negotiating for better rates. As part of a well known professional institute I realized that I could be eligible for lower car insurance premiums. I had started calling different providers to see if I could get a better deal and since the car was a used sedan, as opposed to a newer, sportier coupe I had already gotten some extremely low prices on quotes.

There are many factors that can affect the quote you get from a car insurance agency. Among these, one of the most heavily weighted is the number of demerit points you have on your license. Although some people will complain about this, it actually makes the roads a whole lot safer. For the large majority of drivers, a fine or a ticket is usually a big enough of a deterrent to drive as safe as possible, respecting road signs and speed limits and so on. But, if the offender is relatively wealthy, a fine becomes a short-lived slap on the wrist and loses its ability to influence their behavior behind the wheel. This is why the demerit points system is one of the most effective mechanisms in use today when it comes to reducing unsafe driving practices.

Linked with a specific region's licensing framework, it leverages the threat of higher insurance premiums to influence the behavior of drivers. In graduated licensing frameworks it can slow, or completely stall a driver's progress towards their next level. Additionally, the presence of demerit points on one's driving record may make police more inclined to dole out higher fines should a driver be pulled over for, say, speeding or perhaps failing to come to a complete stop at an intersection.

Not all regions use the demerit points system although if a driver is convicted of an offence outside of the region where they are licensed they may still have demerit points put on their record. For example, if an Ontario driver is caught leaving the scene of an accident in Quebec, they will still be penalized as though the offence took place in Ontario. In some regions the points are added to your record, and in others they are subtracted from an original total. If you collect, or lose enough points you may have your license suspended.

The number of demerit points given for a particular offence as well as the length of time they will remain on a driver's license is dependent on the region (state, province, or territory) in which the driver in question, the offender, has been licensed.

It is important that drivers familiarize themselves with this system as it provides a solid set of guidelines for safe driving and has been designed to keep the broader population safer as well.

Unsafe Driving Practices

The demerit points system is one of the many bureaucratic mechanisms that manage to keep all of us drivers a little bit more cautious and everyone else a little bit safer. It pays to know exactly how many points you'll get for each offence, and although each region is slightly different here is a list of unsafe driving practices that can end up adding, or removing, demerit points from your driving record.

Here they are listed from least to most dangerous:

- Failing to stop at a pedestrian crossing
- Failing to wear a seatbelt
- Failing to obey traffic signs or signals
- Failing to signal
- Driving on a closed road
- Failing to obey a police officer's signals
- Failing to move into another lane when passing a stopped emergency vehicle
- Improper passing
- Failing to yield the right-of-way
- Speeding (16 - 29 km/h, 30 - 49 km/h, 50 km/h or more)
- Following too closely
- Careless driving
- Racing
- Failing to stop for a school bus
- Failing to stop when requested by a police officer
- Failing to remain at the scene of a collision

This list is by no means exhaustive but it should give you a good idea of what constitutes safe driving. Remember, this system wasn't designed to make life harder for drivers; it was created to keep pedestrians and vehicle owners alike much safer.

When I called to "haggle" the insurance companies, it turned out that my driving record was clean. It hadn't always been that way, but I knew that the 2 demerit points I got for speeding back in high school had long since been cleared off my record. The longest span of time that convictions, and their associated demerit points, will stay on your license is two years.

Since the day that I was caught speeding - it happened to be in a school zone - I have always been very conscious of how fast I'm driving. The penalty was hefty, at least \$300, and my record had the two

demerit points on it for a couple of years. It made insurance much more expensive but effectively made me drive slower and safer.

I won't say that I never speed now - that would be lying - but I am much more cautious as a result of my run-in with the police. Also, it forced me to learn exactly what was considered unsafe driving - I did not want to have to pay anything more to the insurance companies than I already had to. For a male under 25, those premiums are already pretty expensive. On top of all that, I ended up telling my friends how much the existence of demerit points on your license can hurt your wallet.

Obviously I wasn't jumping for joy when it happened, but if you take a step back you can see how some simple bits of paperwork, a few regulations and a traffic cop who was good at his job can make things a bit safer for everyone. Knowing what's considered unsafe can also save you money in the long run when it comes to bugging the insurance companies for a better rate.

Speed Limiters Keep Highways Safe

Anyone who has ever driven on a North American highway can tell you just how prevalent the semi-trailer transport truck is. These 18-wheeled beasts are a staple of our roadways and can be seen on every piece of asphalt, at any time of the year, and in all kinds of weather. Nothing slows these guys down - except for a few pieces of simple legislation regarding the maximum allowable speed they are allowed to drive. But even the truckers themselves believe this is a good thing because, in the end, it makes our highways a much safer place to drive.

The first time I had ever heard about mandatory speed limiters in semi-trailers was a few years ago. I was moving across the country and had to get a boat moved too. Now, you can move a boat yourself by towing it, or you can throw it on a train, but I didn't have a car with a big enough engine to move my boat. Not only would I not be able to tow it across the country, but I wouldn't be able to get it to the train either. So I went through a local trucking company. They were cheaper than the train and would take me from point A to point B with no more questions asked.

When the truck arrived at the new place, with the boat strapped down on the flatbed, I got a chance to chat with the driver. I had lots of questions about these ever-present transporters and he was ready and willing to talk.

"I don't want to sound like a jerk," I said, "but why do you guys pass each other so slowly on the highways?"

The driver looked at me and laughed. He knew exactly what I was talking about.

"The trucks aren't allowed to go faster than 105 km/h," he said. "A few years back the governments of Ontario and Quebec both created laws that make all transport trucks use electronic speed limiters."

"So how can you pass one another if your speeds are limited?"

"Well, some trucks are carrying more weight so they go slower. The guys you see passing are going as fast as they can, but that's still only 105. Time is money in the trucks so we have to pass and go as fast as we can."

"If time is so valuable isn't it a bad thing that the government made speed limiters mandatory?" I asked.

"Actually, it's been a really good thing. It keeps us driving more cautiously, its better when it comes to fuel economy and also reduces our impact on the environment. It is actually saving money for our industry and makes the highways a whole lot safer. Without the speed limiters there were lots of drivers that were way too reckless - the accidents alone cost owners lots of money and some people their lives. Overall, the law has been a great thing for us truckers."

As it turns out, it has worked so well in Europe and Canada that the American Trucking Association and Road Safe America have been lobbying the American government to institute similar laws. Mandatory speed limiters are just one example of how a bureaucratic measure can have a real effect on the overall safety of our highways, and knowing about them can help keep your blood pressure lower when transport trucks are passing each other, blocking the fast lane, on the highways.

How Fast Can I Drive?

Transport trucks in Canada and the European Union have been using speed limiters for a few years now. It's a great way to increase overall highway safety and doubles as an effective method of increasing fuel economy as well as the overall impact these vehicles have on the environment. But your average consumer cars don't come with speed limiters installed, so how else is speed controlled?

Of course, we all know about speed limits - those black and white metal signs lining every road in the world do much to help keep us safe. The reasoning is that this one piece of legislation, wherever you happen to be, reduces the difference in speed between vehicles on the same road. Enforcing a common maximum speed limit improves road traffic safety: the World Health Organization lists it as one of the many ways a nation's legislative body can attempt to reduce road casualties.

Also, a 2003 report from the British Columbia ministry of transport, which studied speed reductions in various places around the globe, showed that reducing speed limits led to a decline in the number of motor vehicle accidents and injuries. At higher speeds drivers have less time to react to changing weather conditions or other unsafe scenarios such as collisions or road construction. By putting a cap on the fastest a car can go, the government, and the police officers that enforce the law, can help increase overall road traffic safety.

In the case where there are no posted speed limits, drivers will often simply "go with the flow." This is an effect that I argue comes from the fact that there are posted speed limits everywhere. We are used to keeping our speeds relative to those around us. But what is a good rule of thumb for knowing how fast you can drive when there are no posted signs concerning speeds?

In Canada, the general rule of thumb, if you can't seem to find a speed limit sign on the road you're driving, is as follows: if you're in an urban or suburban area you should drive around 40 km/h. Most

single lanes and residential area roads are set at this limit and it is a safe speed for those environments. On a multiple lane road (2 or higher), a good rule of thumb is to drive 60-70 km/h. If you are on a highway, the generally accepted practice would be to drive 80 - 100 km/h. But it is always better to be sure about what the speed limit is as going too fast can earn you some demerit points and - as I mentioned here - that's not something you want to happen.

In addition to being recommended as a way to reduce pollution, fuel consumption and normal wear and tear on a car, speed limits have been shown time and again to reduce road traffic collisions and casualties. There will always be people who don't obey these signs - I, myself, often find that I'm going around 20 km/h above the speed limit. But even though many people grumble and complain about them, they have proven their worth by forcing us to keep an eye on how quick we're travelling and will no doubt be here to stay for a long time to come.

Learning to Drive

In most regions of North America the prevalence of driver's licenses among the population is so great that it is used as the primary form of identification. The reason the licensing systems in Canada and the United States are so ubiquitous, though, is because anyone who wants to drive must have one. It's one of the many ways that our countries enforce driver safety - you can't get a license unless you've jumped through several bureaucratic hoops, many of which are related to safe driving practices and overall knowledge of road and traffic safety.

"Put your seatbelt on." I rolled my eyes but dutifully complied with my father's instruction.

"Now check your mirrors," he continued, "and make sure you know where your blind spots are."

Parked in the empty lot of a grocery store I waited for Dad to finally let me start his car. It had been two weeks since I passed the written driver's exam necessary for my learner's permit. I was now legally allowed to drive, as long as I was accompanied by someone with a full license. Dad was reluctant to start teaching me, but then he was always very cautious anyways. He prided himself on his ability to keep a cool head behind the wheel.

"It's not a race," was something he'd say whenever some other driver raced around him. He never went over the speed limit. Back in the parking lot Dad continued his instruction.

"Now, if you're comfortable, you can start the car," he said solemnly.

And so I did. It felt amazing to know that I would finally be able to control this wonderful machine. The freedom of the open road, long a mere fantasy in my teenage head, was now that much closer. The engine roared to life and a broad smile creased my face. This was going to be a great day.

The way a citizen is licensed varies between jurisdictions, but in general the rules of the system are designed to gradually expose new drivers to the rules of the road. Often new drivers are given free reign to practice, as long as there is a qualified driver with them in the car. New drivers will also have several restrictions concerning the amount of alcohol they are allowed to consume as well as the number of people allowed to be in the car with them.

Should a person wish to drive a more complicated, or perhaps riskier, vehicle such as a transport truck or a motorcycle, then they must begin an entirely separate process to obtain that license. Again, this is to ensure that everyone begins learning how to drive the vehicle with the idea of safety as their priority. The more a new driver knows about road traffic safety, rules of the road, and safe driving practices, the more likely they are to obtain (and keep) their license.

As much as I hated having to obey all of my father's directions, it was clearly the best way to learn. He had the experience and knew what was considered safe. That was, until we got pulled over.

Hang up for Safety

As I've mentioned before, the bureaucratic safety net that underlies the automotive industry is, for all intents and purposes, very effective. However, when the laws change or a new law is created it's a big challenge for the government to communicate it to every single driver out there. It's up to us to keep ourselves abreast of this information and although we can get it from the normal sources - friends, TV, newspapers, the radio, etc., sometimes drivers slip through the cracks.

Dad had become comfortable with the way I drove his car. Of course, with only my learner's permit I still had to have him, or another experienced driver, in the car with me at all times. It was a good sign when he stopped correcting every second move I made. I was finally able to enjoy the simple act of driving. Don't get me wrong - I loved having Dad there. He's a very knowledgeable guy, at least when it comes to road traffic safety, but as I found out one day, he doesn't know everything.

We had been driving along when Mom called my cell. I turned down the radio and picked up the phone. She wanted us to pick something up on the way home, but before she could tell me what it was I saw flashing blue and red lights in the rear-view mirror.

My heart immediately leapt out of my chest. I turned to Dad who looked confused and stunned at the same time, his eyes wide, staring into the side view mirror of the car.

"Pull over. Now," he said.

I hung up on Mom, in the middle of a sentence, and slowly pulled the car onto the shoulder of the road. I was nervous as the cop approached.

"Just let me do the talking," Dad said.

A few minutes into the conversation with the police officer I had learned the following things:

- I *had not* been speeding
- I *had not* been driving recklessly
- Using a cell phone while driving is illegal in some states - if you're under 18.
- Dad does not know everything.

As it turns out, driving while using a cell phone can be as unsafe as driving while impaired. There have been several studies done, in several countries, that illustrate the delayed reaction time people exhibit

while texting, or talking, and driving at the same time. The general conclusion seems to be that it is dangerous to use a hand-held device while driving. Therefore, many regions have enacted laws that limit the use of these devices while a person is behind the wheel.

I avoided getting a ticket, because it was obvious that I was still learning. Dad also managed to argue that he didn't know about the law and therefore couldn't be held responsible for making sure that I knew about it. The police officer was very cordial and let us off with just a friendly warning, but mentioned that the penalty - if I were to be caught again - would be much more severe.

For up to date information on the latest safety regulations and laws you can sign up for email and text alerts from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) - (<http://www.nhtsa.gov/>) for more information.

Safety Inspection Tips for Antique Cars

There are many considerations one has to take into account when buying an antique or salvaged car. Finding affordable auto insurance and understanding the actual value of the car are two that come to mind immediately, but the most important factors one must make sure they address when buying an antique car is whether or not the vehicle is safe to drive.

For starters, there is generally very little information about these vehicles in car reporting databases used to produce vehicle history reports. There are many horror stories about the kinds of fraud perpetrated by some antique car dealers in an attempt to cover up a vehicle's history. So, without a vehicle history report what are some other ways you can make sure that the used, antique, or salvaged car you're looking to buy has been treated well and had regular maintenance done on it over the years?

We stood on the lawn at my grandfather's place admiring the beautiful lines of a jet black 1973 Corvette Stingray. Grandpa had been looking for this car for what seemed like forever and he had finally bought it. My Dad, ever cautious, wondered aloud about the car's history.

"Was the paperwork all in order, Pops?"

Grandpa nodded his head and replied, "Yeah doesn't she look great?"

Dad and I exchange a momentary look of confusion - Grandpa must've turned his hearing aid down right before we revved the engine earlier.

"Dad!" he yelled, jabbing a finger towards the sky and tapping his ear with his free hand, "Turn up your hearing aid!"

After a few moments we managed to get an idea of how Grandpa made sure the car was in a good, safe condition prior to buying it. He explained how, since there was no information on it in the vehicle history databases, he had to get a mechanic to look at it to determine whether it was safe to drive. It's important to make sure you hire a mechanic that you trust, but if that's not possible I figure I can impart some of my Grandfather's wisdom: below is a list of inspection tips for when you go to purchase an antique or salvaged vehicle.

- Inspection Tip #1 - Inspect the car in daylight. If this isn't possible, then place it under a yellow streetlamp. Deformities are a good indicator of previous damage but are hard to see if the car isn't in a well lit area.
- Inspection Tip #2 - Arrive early. If the seller is doing something fishy like topping up fluids, or moving license plates - you'll see it if you show up early.
- Inspection Tip #3 - Be methodical. Check everything inside and out. Use everything that's useable to make sure it works properly. Look for rust on all the metal (including under the seats), get on your back underneath the car and look for structural damage too. Have a plan of attack, and make a checklist ahead of time.
- Inspection Tip #4 - Don't be afraid to ask the hard questions. Too often a pushy car salesman can get the best of us, and not all mechanics are honest and hard-working. You're about to spend a lot of cash: don't be intimidated by the others involved in the purchase.

These tips are by no means exhaustive, but can go a long way towards protecting yourself and others in the absence of a vehicle history report.

The Dangers of Curb-siders

The purchase of a salvaged or antique car can be exciting but the potential for fraudulent selling practices is high. When my Grandfather bought his 1973 Corvette Stingray one of the things he had worried about was VIN switching. Each car has a unique identifier known as a Vehicle Identification Number (VIN), normally located to one side of the dash, underneath the windshield. On some cars it can also be found on the inside of the driver's side doorjamb.

In the used car markets there is a significant risk of being duped by "curbsiders," people who sell cars outside of the law. One of the ways they scam people is by stealing a car and then switching its vehicle identification number. If a car is reported stolen then its vehicle history report, which is indexed using the VIN, will have this information on it. A sophisticated thief will thus look to switch the VIN on the car he's selling with one that doesn't have a history of theft. Curbsiders have also been known to forge ownership documents as well. So how can you protect yourself against buying a car that is stolen or, worse, unsafe?

The National Insurance Crime Board lists several tips to help prevent this kind of behavior:

- Look closely at the VIN plate to ensure that it hasn't been tampered with
- Verify that the VIN on the car matches the VIN on the pink slip, the registration papers, as well as the one on the driver's doorjamb.
- Get the particulars of the person selling you the car. Ask to see identification and write down their name, address, telephone number, etc.
- Call the numbers associated with the seller - make sure they're not fake.

According to the Ontario Used Car Dealer's Association, between 18 and 24% of all personal ads placed in order to sell a used vehicle were posted by curbsiders. In a 1992 study conducted in Barrie, Ontario, the rate of used vehicles being sold illegally was pegged at around 40 percent!

Antique and salvaged cars are more prone to this kind of scam, so it really pays to know what a vehicle title paper looks like, or to see the maintenance records of the car before you spend your hard earned cash. Buying a car without this kind of scrutiny can leave you with an unreliable and unsafe vehicle.

The regulations surrounding car safety, such as the requirement for accidents to be reported, or the existence of a VIN and title paper when registering the car for insurance are only as effective as the owner's knowledge of them. Bad people will always find ways to get around laws and take advantage of others - especially in the burgeoning used and antique car markets.

It pays to know about the laws surrounding the sale of cars because it can save you money and keep everyone, including you and your family, that much safer on the roads. So before buying or selling a used, salvaged, or antique car make sure you check with your regional authorities. And although some places have more hoops to jump through than others, it's important to know that it's all in the name of road safety.

The Safety Bureaucracy Moves Online

With respect to the development of more practical and effective safety measures, lawmakers and regulatory agencies are an important influence on the automotive industry as well as its consumers. One of the most effective ways in which the powers that be are developing and communicating the road safety standards is through the use of the internet and mobile devices.

When I moved across the country a few years back, I knew that there were some differences between the regions in terms of their overall road safety standards. In one area the speed limit was 10 km/h higher on the freeway than the other. Also, the new area had - and I counted once - 17 crosswalks on the way from where I lived to where I worked. The driving styles are different too: the old place was much more aggressive, as it had a larger population. The new place ran at a much slower speed, pedestrians ruled the roads and drivers would stop in the middle of any road except the highway to let them cross.

My girlfriend and I had several conversations about this on the long drive over. We wondered what the differences were between licensing systems and whether or not the fines and offences were the same.

In order to learn more about the differences I went online and simply searched for regional safety standards. Search engines these days will use the location associated with your computer's IP address in order to prioritize search returns that are linked with your geographic area.

In Canada, one can find a plethora of resources on provincial websites about safety precautions and driver's education in each respective region. They've even moved several of their kiosk services online which has reduced wait times and overall apathy towards the bureaucracy that was originally designed to help increase safety.

One of the services that is not available online is getting a new license. You have to show up to the actual kiosk in order to prove you are who you say you are, which of course is a safety measure designed to keep the licensing system effective. However, by posting the information online that I needed to

bring with me in order to get my new license the province has significantly reduced wait times and extra trips.

The more connected the traffic and road safety authorities become, the more effective their safety measures are. Most people simply aren't aware of new changes in the law. My generation goes to the Internet for our information - we tweet, post, like and BBM each other. If the information is online (and in a decent format) then it stands a good chance of going viral based simply on the way current technology allows us to talk to one another. The best way to ensure a higher standard of safety is to make sure it gets communicated and the internet is one of the most effective ways to do so.

Online Resources Boost Public Knowledge of Road Safety

Our knowledge of safety standards is really the crucial factor in ensuring their success and overall effectiveness. One of the best ways the automotive industry's safety authorities can educate the population is by making sure they are connected and have a good online presence.

In the past, existing media outlets such as radio, television and newspaper were great avenues for disseminating information - especially when it came to road safety. There were also community outreach programs that are still effective, and thus in use today. I can remember two police officers coming into my grade school class and asking us questions about how to make sure we crossed the road safely ("Look both ways!" we all shouted), or what the difference between the green and red colors on a traffic light was.

These days though, in order to make sure any message about driver, road or highway safety is communicated properly the authorities need to make sure they make it available online.

Some organizations have picked up this idea very quickly. For instance, you can sign up for email alerts from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration regarding vehicle recalls and other wide-reaching announcements concerning car safety. As I mentioned here, the provincial ministries of transportation in Canada have made a significant attempt to place safety resources online and have even gone so far as to offer many of their kiosk services online.

In terms of real-time updates concerning road traffic safety, one can always turn to the radio for information. Most cities in North America have radio stations devoted to educating visitors on the specifics of their area. But if one was so inclined there are a large volume of traffic safety apps available in most mobile app stores. The regional authorities in several major cities have had apps designed that will update the end user on road conditions, ongoing construction as well as traffic accidents throughout the area.

The organizations enforcing the road safety standards have made it really easy to keep abreast of recent changes to existing measures. Most of us are comfortable with the idea of having safety standards enforced upon us, but by leveraging the online medium to communicate with drivers the authorities can have a two-way conversation with the general population. Discussion boards, comment spaces and social bookmarking links are all very effective ways of ensuring your information is connected and one

can only hope that the organizations which develop or enforce safety standards become more comfortable with this aspect of the internet.

By allowing their content to become freely available and easily transmittable the various new and existing safety measures and tips these organizations oversee can be spread even further than is possible with existing communication techniques.