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Dale Buss, Contributor

I am grounded in autos but range broadly.

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Drivers -- But Not All -- Love Vehicles' Push-Button Starts

Push-button starts have become one of the hottest amenities in new vehicles, now offered on more than half of all car models — and appreciated or wanted by more than half of American car buyers.



But while glimpses of this handy option have become ubiquitous in automotive ads, a sliver of the American public refuses to embrace push-button starts, regarding them as actually complicating the entry and ignition process rather than simplifying it.

There's a reason that auto nameplates from the Scion tC to the Acura TLX make sure to show their nifty push-button starts in TV commercials: Most Americans would just as soon have one, and highlighting the device is a quick and easy way for a carmaker to illustrate how it has packed even its lower-priced vehicles with the latest technologies.

“It's a convenience, like the TV remote, and Americans love that kind of thing,” noted Joe Oddo, practice lead for CapGemini's auto-consulting operation, in Troy, Mich. “It also makes it a lot more difficult for thieves to steal cars. So it's rapidly moving down from the luxury market to mid-luxury and beyond.”

Alan Batey, new interim CMO for [General Motors](#), told me that “at 30,000 feet, consumers see it as a high-tech feature. Some of that is because it traditionally has been positioned as more of a high-end product.” At GM, for instance, the feature has spread from Cadillac into Chevy models including

Malibu and Volt.

Overall, 193 out of 334 U.S. 2012 models, or 58 percent, offer standard or optional “keyless ignition” or push-button start, according to Edmunds.com data.

The progression of the feature through Nissan’s lineup is typical. The brand began offering push-button start in 2007 on its Altima mid-size sedan, a mainstream product if ever there was one, and has continued to expand the offering across its portfolio.

Here’s the reason: The take rate for push-button starts in luxury cars already was pushing 71 percent in 2010, according to an AutoPacific study, and topped 60 percent for large luxury SUVs. Buyers of sporty models already were opting for the feature 62 percent of the time, and buyers of mid-size cars and of compact and mid-size crossovers were selecting it 51 percent of the time.

A quick poll of KBB.com visitors in August found that 36 percent of respondents “love[d]” their push-button starts and another 17 percent would “love to” have one but didn’t.

And while only 1 in 10 of respondents to a recent AutoTrader.com poll currently owned the feature, 4 in 10 wanted it in their next vehicle. AutoTrader.com found that, for future purchases, push-button start was one of the top three desired features, right behind GPS and MP3.

The feature’s obvious appeal is the convenience, in most models, of not having to haul out a key fob to start the car as long as you know it’s on your person somewhere or in close proximity, such as in a purse or jacket. And many executions of push-button start also include the car’s recognition of the device as the driver approaches, automatically unlocking at least the driver’s door.

“I have this feature in my 2010 RAV4 Limited V6,” an owner named Roger Carr told Edmunds.com recently. “Just like that I can lock, unlock and start my car without ever having to dig a key out of my pocket [and] my wife enjoys not having to dig through her purse. Also, with a small child, it can make things extremely easy when coming and going from the car with your arms full. [And] the fact that it won’t let you lock your keys in the car is nice.”

Auto executives indicated that women tend to favor the feature somewhat more than men because of the security aspects. “Women going up to their car in the dark, or with armfuls of groceries or carrying a baby, have no need to hunt through our purse or pockets for a key,” noted Elizabeth Robinson, president of a marketing firm.

There are even positive implications for families with young drivers. “This is a great way to market the car to anyone who’s worried about their teenager having the car out in bad neighborhoods at night,” said April Masini, an online advice columnist.

At the same time, however, the KBB.com survey found 13 percent of

respondents “hate[d]” push-button starts, another 20 percent “ have never used it” and were “not interested,” and also 14 percent who counted themselves “indifferent” to the feature’s charms.

Marcia Brier, a public-relations pro in Needham, Mass., objected to several aspects of the push-button start in her BMW. She thinks the fob is awkwardly large. Her car also has a slot that must house the fob before the push-button works “and sometimes we forget it’s there.” She objects to having to put her foot on the brake to start the car. “We are finally used to it, but my 87-year-old father — who drives — has no idea how to start this car,” Brier said.

Paige Wolf, a [Philadelphia](#) car owner, agreed with that plaint. “It used to be that I could turn the car on or off from the passenger seat, like to turn on the air conditioning while my husband was buckling our son into the car seat” in the rear, she said. “Now you have to have your foot on the brake to start it, so you have to go back around to the driver’s side to do anything. [It’s] very annoying.”

Some owners have come to dislike the feeling that their key fob could be floating just about anywhere in their vehicle instead of being able to count on its being anchored in an ignition slot on the steering column or dashboard. Or, as Brier put it, “What was wrong with the key? You put it in the ignition, you knew where it was, you put the key in your pocketbook, and life went on.” Besides, she added, “Nothing jingles anymore.”

Some of the reasons for opposition are less obvious. For example, many drivers simply have scalded their fingertips on start buttons that have been baking in exposure to the sun.

And like any new automotive feature as it spreads, the state of the art in push-button starts still leaves some things to be technically desired. For one thing, said CapGemini’s Oddo, the feature could use some standardization to make it easier for consumers to know what to expect.

“It’s hard to know exactly how long to push some of the buttons to make sure you turn off the vehicle,” for example, Oddo said. “So there is some risk management yet to do with engineering to reduce the risk that people will actually leave the vehicle on.”

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