

# Ford says buttons begone - New driver interface

*By Grace Macaluso, Windsor Star May 4, 2010*

Windsor native Paul Aldighieri remembers the first question he and a product development team at Ford Motor Co. posed as they began the process of creating a new multimedia infotainment system.

“What do people love about their cars?”

The answer came almost four years later with the development of new driver interface called MyFord Touch.

“We want to be leaders in technology,” said Aldighieri, an ergonomist who holds a kinesiology degree from the University of Waterloo. The F.J. Brennan high school graduate started his career with Ford in 1993 as an ergonomist at the Windsor Engine plant before transferring to the automaker’s Dearborn, Mich., headquarters where he works as a designer in product development.

“More and more people are bringing in their infotainment stuff (DVDs, GPS devices) with them in the car,” he said. “The technological solution -- it’s not so much the infotainment, per se, but how you connect to it, how easy it is to connect to it, and the elegance of connecting to it. MyFord Touch is where we’re going to set ourselves apart.”

The technology, unveiled in January at the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, builds on Ford’s Sync technology, a voice-activated system for such devices as MP3 players, Bluetooth-enabled phones and USB drives.

The new console combines voice recognition with graphic screens and touch controls on the steering wheel. More importantly, its design and location in the vehicle allows customers to drive with minimal distraction, said Aldighieri. “It’s simpler and safer. We’re providing a lot of display area to help present information that people want to manage.”

MyFord Touch will first be available later this summer as options in the 2011 Ford Edge and Lincoln MKX and the following year in the next generation Ford Focus -- one of the automakers more affordable models.

It retains the traditional car interior layout -- instrument cluster in front of the driver, centre stack dividing the dashboard -- and adds more voice control plus colour LCD screens for the presentation of information. Displays include two small colour LCD screens on either side of the speedometer, with the left-hand one showing vehicle functions and the right-hand one displaying entertainment, phone and data controls. An eight-inch touchscreen LCD rests at the top of the centre stack and has a customizable interface so the driver can choose to display his own choice of functions, rather than navigate via menus.

“What these screens do provide are a supporting role and context of that interaction,” said Aldighieri. “It gives you status information on your four core activities -- communication or phone, entertainment, climate and navigation.”

Peter Frise, scientific director and CEO of the Auto21 research centre at the University of Windsor, said automakers are paying more attention to multimedia infotainment systems as a way of increasing sales.

“It’s obviously a useful marketing tool because it says something about the car and allows people to use the car the way they want to, but it’s also a way of making the act of driving more comfortable, safer and more effective.”

When you combine “voice interface, touch interface and graphic interface it caters to how different people interact with equipment and different technology.”

But it's important to make sure these systems enhance safety by reducing the risk of driver distraction, added Frise.

“The whole issue of the human machine interface is really foundational to how we drive our cars. So, you're starting to notice a more intelligent layout of dashboard with much more simple and clear controls, simpler and easier-to-read instruments that encourage drivers to keep their attention out the window and hands on the controls and steering so they're able to respond to traffic situations quickly and efficiently.”

Aldighieri said the car of the future will rely less and less on buttons and switches.

“We're transitioning away from a button for every function to something that's more elegant,” he said. “We're providing fewer controls on the surface and replacing that with nice elegant organization to tell us what you want to interact with. And we're going to give you a nice interface to get it done.”

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