

FISITA World Automotive Congress

Car safety remains region-specific

Panel concludes that few new features due in Europe would help much in India

Mark Appleton
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MUNICH ■ The dream of creating a car that is safe for all the world's markets is unattainable – for now at least.

That was the consensus from a series of presentations on safety at the 2008 FISITA World Automotive Congress here. FISITA is the world body for automotive engineering.

Technical solutions exist that will reduce the number of auto-related deaths and injuries. But the problem is that automakers have to take into account the different automotive infrastructures and patterns of driver and pedestrian behavior.

Ulrich Widmann, head of vehicle safety at Audi, explained how Europe, with its mature automotive market and advanced highway infrastructures, is already moving toward the widespread adoption of on-board safety systems. The next step, he said, will be vehicle-to-vehicle and vehicle-to-infrastructure communication.

At the other end of the scale is India. The country has a relatively unsophisticated road network and a culture in which safety often comes second to simply getting from one place to another. That means many advanced safety features are not very important there, said Dilip Chenoy, the director general of the Indian So-

ciety of Automotive Engineers.

He said Indian motorists usually drive with their door mirrors folded in to avoid possible damage from other vehicles in overcrowded cities. They don't want to risk the replacement or repair costs for a broken mirror. With such basic issues to overcome, the prospect for vehicle telematics in India seems light years away.

US problems

Meanwhile, the US, while comparable to Europe in many respects, has its own unique safety issues. Adrian Lund of the US-based Insurance Institute for Highway Safety said speed limits have been going up in the US since the end of the mandatory 55 mph (about 89kph) limit of the early 1970s. They have risen to 80 mph in some places. This combined with an increase in average vehicle horsepower will offset many of the advances made in occupant protection, Lund said.

The logic is simple enough – give people more horsepower and they drive more quickly. As a result, accidents are more serious. Lund also pointed out that road fatalities mirror economic cycles in the US. Rates go down when times are lean. They spike during boom periods. Auto-related death and injury reductions cannot always be attributed to vehicle safety advances or driver education programs, he said.

Seat belt use also is still an issue in the US. Although mandatory in all states except New Hampshire, an es-



Side-view mirrors are a crucial safety feature in the US and Europe. That is not the case in India, where some motorists pull in their mirrors for fear of damaging them in the dense traffic in many cities.

timated 9,000 people die each year in the US because they did not wear their seat belts. Fatalities related to drunk driving are also high in the US.

Chinese fatalities

On the technical side, vehicle structure crash incompatibility remains a significant contributor to road deaths in a market where Smart ForTwos compete for road space with a large number of full-sized cars and SUVs.

In China, road fatalities reached 110,000 in 2002 but fell back to 81,000 in 2007. Further reductions are expected in coming years, said Feng Xingye, Volkswagen's Beijing-

based senior manager for homologation and technical development. Better driver behavior including more seat belt usage as well as improved road infrastructure are seen as part of the reason for this improvement. However, there remains a requirement for additional research to fully understand and further improve road traffic safety in China, said Feng. Driver education should remain the No. 1 priority for the Chinese authorities he said.

So while some delegates at the FISITA congress called for global harmonization of standards in specific areas of automotive technology, it appears that as far as safety technology is con-



Panel members at the World Automotive Congress in Munich this month.

cerned, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the shared goal of reducing road deaths and injuries. **ANE**

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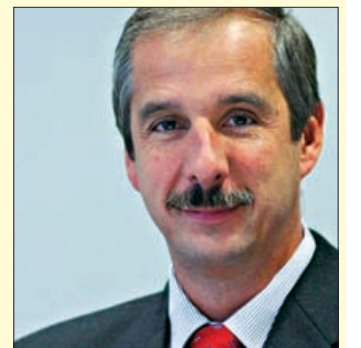
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Daimler's Weber wants to see emissions laws harmonized.



ZF's Paul says automotive engineers should cooperate more.



BMW's Draeger fears the high cost to develop new electric vehicles.

BMW, Daimler bosses call for common electric car standards

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MUNICH ■ Daimler's and BMW's top engineers said automakers should cooperate to develop common standards for electric cars.

Thomas Weber, who is head of R&D at Daimler and its subsidiary Mercedes-Benz Cars, said the auto industry faces huge cost pressures as it develops mass-market electric vehicles and also attempts to reduce CO2 emissions from diesel and gasoline cars.

He called for the auto industry to avoid costly duplication of research and development as it moves toward the electrical era.

Vehicle program managers need to agree on common technical standards for electric vehicle platforms and components, Weber said at the 2008 FISITA World Automotive Congress here. FISITA is the international association of automotive engineers.

Klaus Draeger, BMW board member responsible for development, said the cost of developing the technology for new electric vehicles may be beyond what individual automakers can afford.

"The race to use less crude oil is a major challenge, but we need to share the burden between all parties. This is not just an auto industry issue," he said.

Weber and Draeger see technical challenges and solutions involved in developing full-electric vehicles. Therefore, they support the early creation of industrywide component standards for suppliers to prevent duplication of development of major components such as battery packs.

Dealing with 'nonsense'

Michael Paul, ZF Friedrichshafen's chief technical officer, said the auto industry needs greater international cooperation between automotive engineers. He believes that if engineers were more willing to share their findings it would result in the faster, more-efficient development of common standards for components, which could then be customized by individual automakers.

He said that FISITA is well positioned to be a leader in the drive to create greater harmonization of pollution regulations and technical standards.

Daimler's Weber also said that emissions laws in Europe, the US and emerging markets such as China should be harmonized to a common global standard.

He said: "At the moment, they are different and we need to say: 'This is nonsense.'" **ANE**