

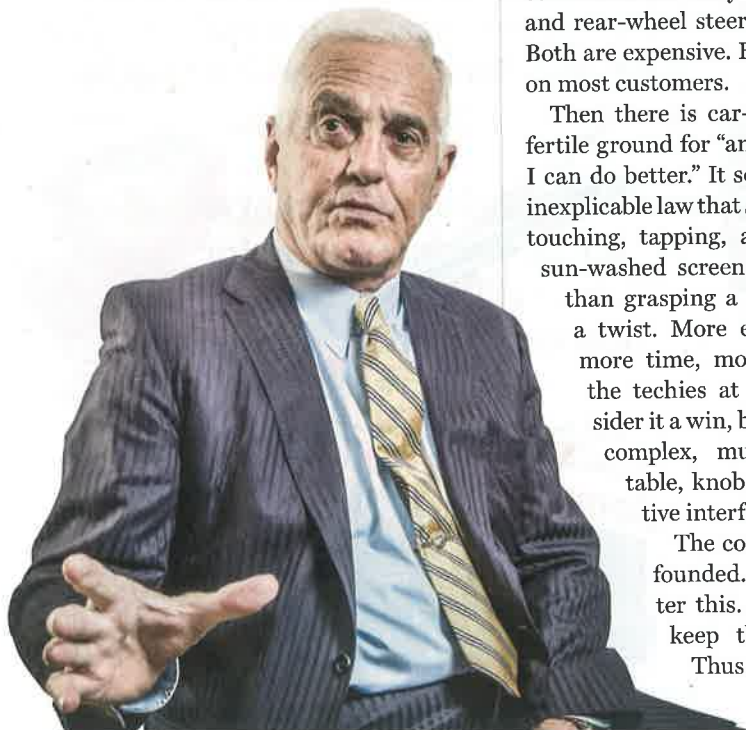
# Monkey See, Monkey Do

HOW STUPID IDEAS BECOME REAL.

BY BOB LUTZ

**In the automotive industry, “new” is good. But is it always? I maintain that a lot of what we herald as the latest, greatest technological achievements turn out to be, in reality, expensive distractions of no inherent value.**

If you wonder why car companies engage in one new technology or another, you're not alone. The answers are complex and interrelated. Many bad ideas originate from a respected manufacturer. A competitor is then inclined to start a similar program of its own, believing that the rival is so wise and so farsighted, it couldn't possibly be making



a colossal mistake. Or a supplier tells them, in strictest confidence, that their most vicious, most feared competitor has just ordered *this* amazing new device, and they can have it, too!

The fear of being left behind triggers a lot of stupid stuff. Among the more questionable techno items that have enjoyed media acclaim but drew yawns from consumers are fully active suspensions and rear-wheel steering. Both are sexy. Both are expensive. Both are totally lost on most customers.

Then there is car-driver interface, a fertile ground for “anything you can do, I can do better.” It somehow follows an inexplicable law that states that repeated touching, tapping, and scrolling on a sun-washed screen is more advanced than grasping a knob and giving it a twist. More electrons are used, more time, more distraction, but the techies at the company consider it a win, because it's the most complex, multilayered, inscrutable, knob-free, counterintuitive interface yet devised.

The competition is dumbfounded. “We've got to counter this. We won't let them keep the lead for long.”

Thus, the arms race

escalates. Everyone loves it, except, of course, the befuddled consumer, who can no longer safely operate the car.

Amazingly, a common reaction at the car companies is, “Well, this is progress, and this is the future, and they'll just have to learn to deal with it.”

Really? We're supposed to force the customer? Deprive her or him of simplicity, for the sake of being able to boast that we have the most advanced system?

During my career, I was able to kill countless “sensational innovations,” or at least “sensational we-can-do-it-toos.” Remember those worthless liquid crystal instrument displays of the Eighties? Or the “talking car”? But I wasn't able to kill them all. And nobody ever will.

Is “vehicle autonomy” one of today's action-driving buzzwords? “We can do more autonomy than anyone else.” There will be false starts, bad solutions, useless features, things that will fall by the wayside. But, sadly, I do believe in the inevitability of autonomous vehicles, so the trial-and-error approach is probably justified.

As always, car companies have to exercise keen judgment (often a rare commodity) and decide on the best mix of running today's business for profit versus investing in a future that we're pretty sure is going to come about. The better a car company is at the right blend of those two core activities—the one lucrative, the other expensive—the greater the long-term success. ■

*Bob Lutz has been The Man at several car companies. Ask him about cars, the auto industry, or life in general.*

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