Beat: Automobiles

AUTOMOBILES GOING AUTONOMOUS

What do consumers want?

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USPA NEWS - It was less than eight years ago that I ran a survey on behalf of a major tech company to discover consumers views on choosing, buying, driving and servicing cars.

I went global (North and South America, Asia and Europe), focusing on technology adoption and acceptance, what consumers were comfortable with (“would you allow you child to be transported in a self-driving car?“), and how much did the technology reputation of the brand influence their choice.

In this article I review what consumers said, and take a look at more recent reports from 2021 to see what has changed.

INTRODUCTION

Having spent time researching the car buying and driving habits of consumers years ago, I was intrigued to find out the latest views published during last 18 months. Maybe COVID-19 had changed things (you think?), and perhaps technology had moved on? It´s funny when you look back to Ridley Scott´s original Blade Runner movie from 1982. I remember seeing all the futuristic technology that was supposed to come about in 2019 (the film is set in a dystopian future Los Angeles of 2019). From flying cars (didn´t happen), to video phone booths (didn´t happen) to colonies in space (didn´t happen), its easy to be wrong about the future. Opinions change, so I´ll start by looking at the original research I did, and see what others are saying in the last few months.

Original research

Let´s take a look at a few areas that I surveyed back in 2013. The study surveyed more than 1,500 consumers across 10 countries. This global report examined consumer preferences of technology used when buying and driving automobiles. I built some survey questions that homed in on a few specific areas.

The first area was the buying experience. 83% did their buying research online and 74% were likely to share driving habits online. Of the 61% who actually used manufacturers websites, only about 37% actually trusted automaker websites when purchasing and 55% were happy to have a virtual interaction with a dealer to close the deal.

Interestingly enough, other questions asked consumers about their desires concerning automated ways to track car maintenance costs, and “62% stated they would purchase a device designed to keep them on track with their monthly budget for gas and auto maintenance“.

AUTONOMOUS CARS

Now let´s deal with the matter of autonomous, or self-driving´ cars. As I was quoted stating at the time:

“Then there was the real eye opener: consumers really do place trust in automated or driver-less automobiles, especially in some of the emerging “˜BRIC´ countries including Brazil, India and China.“

The tech company I was working for put out a press release stating: "More than half of global consumers (57%) stated they would be likely to ride in a car controlled entirely by technology that does not require a human driver. The most trusting consumers in this regard

were in Brazil with 96%, India with 86%, and China with 70%."

Kids on board: When asked about children, 46% would still would trust their kids to ride in driver-less automobiles. Again, it was the emerging countries that, by-and-large, were more trusting than the more established economies.

Where are we today?

We are certainly getting there with the technology, but, as with the Blade Runner example I gave earlier, things are progressing slower than we thought. Self-driving cars are still in their infancy. As for self-driving taxis, there maybe an advantage over one driven by a human, but the last passenger may be leaving their virus behind if infected, so people are only now venturing out after COVID-19, and, at the time of writing, parts of Europe are undergoing a fourth lock down and less travel anywhere, whether with a driver or not.

Already, Forbes is saying that self-driving cars will be going mainstream this year (check out the article: “Why 2021 Will Be The Year Self-Driving Cars Go Mainstream“, from Stephen McBride, January 6th, 2021. Stephen thinks COVID hit the “˜fast-forward button´ as it has done for 5G and solar.

He thinks “Waymo is the front-runner in the self-driving race. It´s been ferrying paid passengers around Phoenix (Arizona, USA) in its minivans for the past year. And often with no human “safety driver“ standing by to grab the wheel if something goes wrong“. He also talks about “Amazon-owned Zoox unveiled its autonomous robotaxi on December 14. It´s a fully driverless vehicle built for ride hailing. Passengers face each other. It can´t be driven by a human“”because there´s no steering wheel“.

Whatever happens, autonomous vehicles are coming ““ unlike the video phone booth from Blade Runner! It will be interesting to see which countries will be the first to embrace them in a big way. Perhaps my earlier research will play out. Only time will tell. Stay tuned to hear more about the automobile technology that´s coming!

Look out for future reports and articles looking at the future of work, business transformation and a deeper dive into particular industries and technologies.

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