2007 BMW X5 4.8
Technology Threatens to Ruin a Great Car
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For: The Wheel

BMW makes spectacular cars – I'm probably not supposed to admit this, but I have been a good customer personally over the years. Their skills in creating automobiles that always reward spirited driving, while serving well in their basic role of reliable transportation, is unparalleled. I've even grown to really appreciate the "Bangle look" reflecting flowing motion and a twist of the metal just to make things interesting. But the day that BMW executives decided to force customers to use what appears still to be a pet project of senior management – the iDrive – was a dark day. I've driven many cars with iDrive now, and am reasonably proficient using it. I can almost imagine the day that this brainstorm was thrown up on the white board. What a great idea – one knob/switch/push/pull control, placed at the driver's fingertips, that could literally run all the options and passenger amenities, without having to reach for the dashboard. This sounded like a great idea. Everyone gets a pass once in a while if they have a bad idea, don't they? But what's critical is for business managers to recognize a bad idea and redirect immediately, reflecting market response, customer feedback and experience in the sales arena. What is disappointing is to detect a sense of arrogance from management reflecting a "they will learn to love this technology" sentiment. This might even have been ok for a short time…give the customer some time to adjust to a new way of doing things….but the iDrive is NO better today than it was the day it was released. Yes, there have been some concessions along the way – there is now a "menu" button to press when you are totally lost in the system. Ah, but that means you

go back to "start" and have to push/pull/twist your way back to selecting a preset radio station or some such advanced activity.

A year or two ago, I was at the local carwash and a proud owner of a new BMW 745i was spying his brand new car as it was being toweled off lovingly. I mentioned to him that this was a great car and asked how he liked it. He puffed up appropriately and sang its praises. Then I asked him about the iDrive – and it was truly funny/sad – he became defensive, frowned and snapped at me that he'd practiced and become VERY proficient with this device and really thought it was great. His body language said otherwise. A polygraph would have been having conniptions. But he'd just dropped $85 large on this car and he was NOT going to admit that he hated the very interface between himself and this wonderful car.

Let's review what we do with a car:
- o We are not adjusting the settings on dampers, engine timing, fuel mixture, wing angles on this car while we drive
- o We are not plotting the course to Alpha Centauri
- o We are not adjusting the force field or turning on a cloaking device surrounding the car
- o We do not want to take the time to customize 27 features for 3 separate drivers
- o We are not streaming WWF title bouts (yet)
  - ✓ We do pick up the kids at school
  - ✓ We do drive to work
  - ✓ We do take a drive in the country
  - ✓ We do make a phone call from the car
  - ✓ We do get lost sometimes
  - ✓ We do listen to music or the news and change channels/bands frequently
  - ✓ We do adjust the ventilation system
  - ✓ We do change gears frequently

Here is the point (finally): iDrive makes almost all of these functions complicated – adding steps and REQUIRING one's eyes to be taken off the road, not to find the buttons or knobs, but to see if your command was the correct one by checking the status of what you've done on the screen. iDrive has taken radio controls, previously in a mature state of usability and made them a multi-task task. What was once one or two clicks is now 5 or 6. And what is truly astonishing is that someone along the way convinced the BMW execs that this was a big enough problem to call for the addition of some old-fashioned buttons as an alternative to using iDrive. However, the buttons have been placed in a hard to reach place and don't operate the way everyone else's on the planet operates – yielding a sense of helplessness, that – it really doesn't get any better. The BMW owner is stuck with iDrive, which is not an option, and several other features that reflect a growing instinct to show off with technology while making the car difficult to operate. Two items beyond the iDrive jumped out on the X5: They've made it hard to get into the console with small, delicate buttons that if you're not holding your finger in the correct angle, you put a bind on the button so it won't open. Oh, and the tiny glove box has a very cool clamshell door for which you must hunt to find the latch, as its hidden in a non-intuitive location on the dash. They're over-thinking themselves and it's frustrating.

Not to be someone with all negatives and no solutions. Here's a way to use the iDrive interface. Flip the thinking from trying to use iDrive for everything, to just one or two infrequent things. My pickup truck has a much cooler and well thought out use of steering wheel switches to enable me to do the high volume repetitive tasks with a flick of the thumb or forefinger on the wheel. BMW should move the phone switches to iDrive, use voice recognition, and move the common tasks to the steering wheel.

You'd think that this article is written by someone with a bias against BMW, or maybe just someone who is not technologically savvy and won't spend the time to learn about these new toys. WRONG. I am a BIG fan of BMW (there, I said it). And it's for that reason that I'm doing this rant. Maybe someone, or some customer in a showroom will be able to get through to the executives that this technology is DRIVING customers away and opening the doors for competitors. It is time that someone in a higher place than I stand firmly and state "the Emperor has no clothes." Automotive journalists are now worn down – they ranted at the beginning, got some minor improvements, and now just mention iDrive in passing as a nuisance.

The bottom line: Would I decide against this wonderful car because of my dislike of the iDrive? Well, if there were no viable competitors, I'd probably swallow hard and buy. But there are viable competitors, and they would get a very receptive shopping trip and a clear shot at the deal before I would swallow the technological pill offered by the folks at BMW.

P.S. The BMW X5 is a really great car. Plenty of room for 5, and can carry 7 in a pinch. We think it's now one of the best looking mid-size luxury SUV's, and while the first gen X5 seemed to miss the mark a bit, the 07 has hit the bullseye. With great power from the 4.8 liter V8, a wonderful ride that combines firmness without any harshness whatsoever – this is an SUV that is primed for a road trip with plenty of people and stuff. One very noticeable asset is a total lack of wind noise – they really got the aero right on the X5. Also – we had a chance to run a few laps at Thunderhill and you will be surprised to hear that this SUV is very competent in a performance driving situation. Turn in at a conservative pace was surprisingly crisp, of course body roll was an issue, but overall the X5 handles very nicely, considering. The huge sunroof is a nice plus, seats are great. Priced at around $60,000 it certainly should be all these things. This is a vehicle that is at the top of the heap in a very competitive space. Does the technology get in your way? Only you can make that decision.