



Won't Touch That!

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I grew up in a small city in Idaho, and I had a driver's license and car (if you can really call it that...) at age 15. I loved being young enough to have time to tinker with it, fix it, or install the latest stereo system someone would give away for free. But since most of my friends didn't get their licenses right away, we'd cram half a dozen or more of us in (or on) the car at the same time. We didn't have public transportation, but that was OK. With a little bit of duct tape, my car would take me anywhere I needed to go.

It wasn't long before that when I made my first trip to Boston. The first time I stepped onto the T and experienced a subway and my first time on a public bus are unforgettable. Personally, I was thrilled, but not everyone in my family shared my feelings. Looking around on the train, you could tell not every passenger was either. I recall faces expressing thoughts of their own reasons for favoring one way of transportation or another, ranging from those who were worried about trains exposing them to germs to others who wanted to limit pollution. Some were there simply because they didn't have access to another type of transportation.

Now I live near Boston, with my own car (sans duct tape), and have access to those same trains and buses. As you can imagine, though, I haven't been using them lately with the onset of COVID-19, nor have most of the people who I would see when I rode them from time to time. We all wonder if the pandemic is going to affect the way we move in the next few months – and years. Well, yes, but to what extent? We want to protect ourselves and others, but also need to protect the planet. Cars, trains, and buses will remain a part of our lives, so how can we adapt to life beyond 2020 and still be mindful of these concerns?

Of course, there are the frequently mentioned behavioral changes we can all make: hand washing, social/physical distancing, and staying at home when sick. But there is a role for technology, too. I'm sure there are many innovations that we'll see soon enough that will play a part, but most of us have already been exposed to one technology that is already helping: using our voice instead of our hands. No new (or free!) stereo required!

For over a decade, we've watched how well-designed voice assistants can help keep people safe while driving by keeping hands on the wheel and eyes on the road. Now we see that it can help keep people from touching the same surfaces in vehicles that may have others using it. Consider this when you rent a traditional car via Enterprise, a personal car via Turo, or you share a car via Zipcar. While each of these companies and owners may do their best to keep their cars clean, using voice may help reduce the need to touch shared surfaces within these cars – just in case. Pair this with the fact that natural voice commands are universal, giving you the ability to skip having to learn how to navigate a new graphical user interface, and it's a win-win.

Going one step further, we showed at CES 2020 how voice assistants will allow users to interact with public transportation while reducing physical contact. For example, we showed that passengers can get information about a bus from the outside before boarding to learn about the destination. Passengers could make requests while on board, limiting the amount of times a rider has to press a 'Request Stop' button or touch other surfaces. We demonstrated how passengers could do this without having to squeeze between others on their way to the front of the bus to talk to the driver. And we designed this prior to CES and COVID-19 based on our research that showed users found the sanitary benefits, among other things, as a compelling reason for voice assistants to be in public transportation in the future.

Thinking about health implications is a part of life for the foreseeable future. It is something I couldn't have imagined while driving in my first car, or during my first ride on the T. Something that most of us didn't imagine a few short months ago. But we're still going to go places, even if it won't be crammed next to five friends leaving Ammon City pool in my aging Honda Civic. It doesn't take the Voice First advocate in me to explain why using voice assistants can enable us to keep doing the things we're used to doing as we get around – and doing so in a way that helps us keep ourselves and others safe.