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To installers of car stereos, auto systems sound fishy

Integrated wiring cuts into business

By Keith Reed, Globe Staff | August 23, 2004

When Derek Kenney unhooked the radio in a customer's 2000 Cadillac Sedan DeVille DTS, music wasn't the only thing that stopped coming out of the car.

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The advertisement features a photograph of a dog sitting on a grassy hill overlooking a lake and mountains. The text is overlaid on the image in various colors and fonts.

The car's owner had taken the car to Kenney's Allston shop, Sound in Motion, hoping to have the factory-installed stereo replaced with something with better sound quality. But Kenney soon discovered that pulling out the original stereo would mean the car's air conditioning, alarm, and computer diagnostics systems would stop working. In the end, the old radio ended up in the trunk just to keep the car running properly.

"The guy actually has two radios in his car, one he listens

to and one to keep the car working," Kenney said.

The experience illustrates the latest fight between car manufacturers and the makers and installers of aftermarket car audio equipment.

Vehicles are increasingly being designed with all of their electronics systems wired to each other; i.e., the system in the Cadillac that ties the stereo and the air conditioning together. The changes allow both drivers and the manufacturers to take advantage of leaps in technology, making it possible for the driver to control his air conditioning from the radio controls, or for a dealership to diagnose mechanical problems easily.

But many in the aftermarket suspect that more sinister motives are at play. The new integrated systems make it difficult, if not impossible, to upgrade cars with new stereos, speakers, or alarms in some cases. That, they say cuts into aftermarket sales and forces drivers to go to manufacturer-controlled dealerships where upgrades are often more expensive.

"It's obviously a good business model for them to maintain full control over the delivery chain, and it's more convenient for them to be able to add all of the car's features into the car's stereo," said Matthew Swanston, a spokesman for the Consumer Electronics Association, an Arlington, Va., trade group that represents aftermarket parts makers.

Recent data illustrate how lucrative the aftermarket car electronics sector is. The Consumer Electronics Association says that sales for car audio components alone were more than \$2 billion last year, with the fast-growing market for in-car video, computing, and games systems totaling about \$517 million.

At the same time, the number of cars with integrated systems that "lock out" the aftermarket is growing as well. Of 535 new car models selling in the United States this year, 209 of them need special adapters to allow a common aftermarket stereo to work with their electronics systems, according to CEA. Another 60 prohibit upgrading of the car stereo at all because of complicated physical or electrical systems in the vehicles, the group says.

For their part, the automakers argue that the changes they're making are in response to consumer demand for cars with snazzier features that don't need to be upgraded. If it has become more difficult for the aftermarket to design and install products in cars, that's only a byproduct of shifting consumer demand, said Dave Hederich, a spokesman for [General Motors Corp.'s](#) engineering division.

"We're listening to the voice of the customer, and what most customers are telling us is that they want a highly integrated product," he said.

Still, Hederich noted that General Motors does work with aftermarket companies, giving them guidelines on how to develop and install products that work with the complicated systems in GM cars.

Yet some believe that the writing is already on the wall for traditional car electronics. For example, while most cars come equipped with stereos in the dashboards, which can be easily removed, some newer models don't have a physical radio at all. Instead, there's just a screen on the dashboard that displays the name of a station or the track playing on a CD; the components of the actual stereo are wired into the car elsewhere.

"There's not a traditional radio to take out anymore, which then establishes the future direction for the aftermarket," said Stephen Witt, vice president for brand marketing at Alpine Electronics in Torrance, Calif.

Alpine, one of the biggest aftermarket car stereo manufacturers, is now part of a consortium of 19 automakers and 16 aftermarket companies trying to develop a standard for networking car electronics equipment. The project, dubbed Media Oriented Systems Transport, would develop one common interface that all automakers or aftermarket could plug into, similar to the popular USB and Ethernet ports found on most home computers.

At the same time, many aftermarket companies are quietly moving away from the development of the kinds of car stereos and equipment that are popular now and moving toward the development of products that let drivers plug in devices like iPods or portable computers.

Witt said Alpine has devoted about 70 percent of its research and development efforts through 2010 in that direction, although he wouldn't disclose a dollar amount for those efforts.

Alpine is "engineering these kinds of solutions today because we see the traditional components of car stereo declining in sales from 2004 on," he said.

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