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Traffic safety bulletin

The Commuter Grind

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So the kids are back to school learning something that you can use in your daily commute. Remember school fire drills? Commuter driving is just the same. Follow a few simple rules and everybody gets out alive. Don't run, walk in straight lines, and hold the handrail and a school can be emptied in two minutes. Adults have forgotten the simplicity of this. All it takes is some yahoo to throw a firecracker at a soccer match and scores of people get trampled.

Don't Run

In commuter traffic the problem is that everyone is going too slowly, not too fast. The key to stop and go traffic is to stop in time. That brings us to this week's question. What is the recommended following space? The answer that works is to have a three second space in ideal conditions. When the rear of the vehicle ahead passes a fixed point like a shadow or a bridge, it should take a thousand and one, a thousand and two, a thousand and three for you to reach the same point. This fits for all speeds as size of the gap increases when the speed goes up. The real danger in tailgating is that drivers tend to focus their attention only as far ahead as the next car's brake lights. At a three second space you can look past the car you are following to see changes in the traffic flow 15 or 20 seconds ahead. If there is braking and lane changing ten cars ahead, you can predict that others will brake too. Your foot is already on the brake pedal before the driver ahead has even figured out that he is about to rear-end the car ahead of him. Having this *Big Picture Awareness* is like having a crystal ball telling you when the stock market is going to crash before your broker does.

If I had a nickel for every time someone has said, "Leave space and you'll be going backwards" I'd be e-mailing this column from the Cayman Islands. Sure, some people will butt into a three second space, but closing the space doesn't discourage some drivers. It's better to have someone that aggressive ahead of you than behind you. Everybody's happy.

Walk in Straight Lines

The curious thing is that we all have watched the lane hopper, bounce himself right into a lane that is stopped. Studies all over the world have showed that a lot of lane

changing doesn't get you very far ahead. But why trust science, when you can test this for yourself? This works best if you take the same route to work at the same time and is most apparent on freeways like the QEW or 403. Pick a lane and stay in it. Even if other lanes seem to be going faster, hold your position, speeding up and slowing with the pace of your lane. Do this for a week recording the average time it took for your trip. Next week pick a different lane and see if it makes any difference. Chances are, in heavy traffic it won't. Even if you jump from lane to lane you probably won't be able to make an appreciable improvement on a reliable basis. Today you might save a minute, because you chose a lucky lane but tomorrow it might not play out the same way. You will get a better perspective on where the bottlenecks really occur and make fewer, well timed lane changes.

Hold the Handrail

Kids need to steady themselves if they trip on a step. For drivers this means getting used to using all the hands you have for the controls of the car, not your electronics collection. Many of our corporate customers operate large enough fleets to see the difference in the crash statistics when no phone policies are adopted. Two hands on the wheel mean you might actually be able to save yourself if something goes wrong. If you think you are good enough with one hand on the wheel play a round of golf with one hand on the club and see how well you do.

Don't Gawk

This isn't part of the fire drill, but it sure messes up traffic. Somebody has a flat tire on the eastbound side and everybody *in both directions* has to slow down and look. Concentrate on your driving, and keep moving unless you are actually going to stop and offer assistance. The real problem with gawking is that drivers create their own distraction and inevitably a crash happens in a previously undisturbed flow. Everybody who is in the traffic jam knows the problem gawking causes. I hope the person who is the first one to slow down and stare unnecessarily, is reading this so the rest of us don't have to be late for work.

Disclaimer: Printed material is intended for informational purposes only. A driver's best defense against motor vehicle crashes is to participate in a total driver improvement hands-on training program.
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