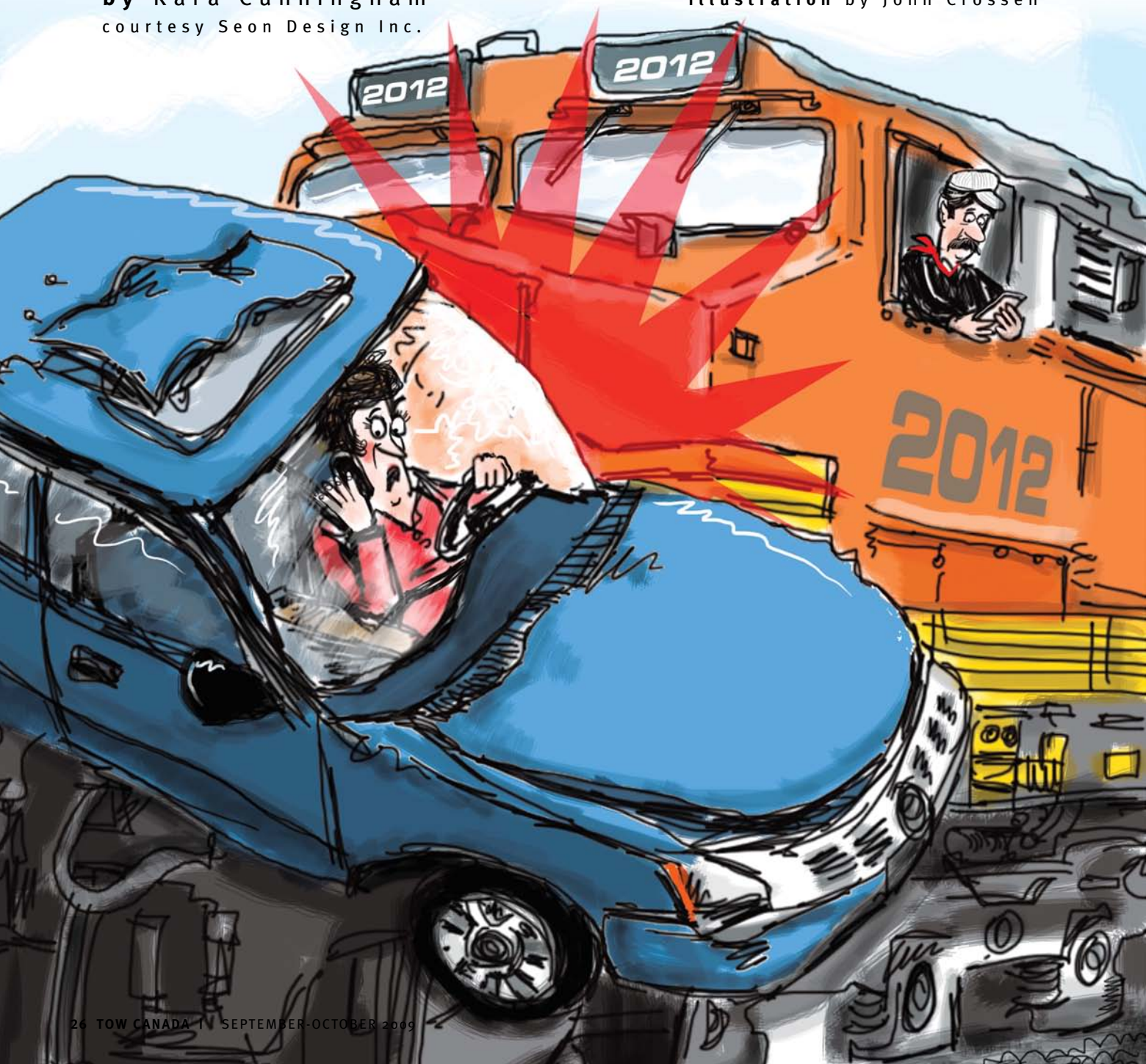


# Distracted Drivers: Putting the public at risk

People entrust their lives to professional drivers every day. So why are some drivers putting the public at risk by text messaging or using their cell phones while driving, and what can be done to prevent it?

by Kara Cunningham  
courtesy Seon Design Inc.

illustration by John Crossen



## Crash statistics linked to texting while driving and cell phone use are escalating.

A study conducted by the Insurance Institute for Highway Motor Safety found that motorists who use cell phones while driving are four times more likely to crash.<sup>1</sup> A British study recently found that motorists who drive while texting are more impaired than a drunk driver, with driver reaction times decreasing as much as 35 percent.<sup>2</sup>

In a recent survey, one in four Americans admitted to texting while driving.<sup>3</sup> The American Medical Association called text messaging while driving "a public health risk" and cited a study that found that text messaging while driving causes a 400 percent increase in time spent with eyes off the road.<sup>4</sup>

Distracted driving is the leading cause of motor vehicle accidents. According to a 2006 study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, driver inattention is the leading factor in most crashes and near crashes. Nearly 80 percent of crashes and 65 percent of near crashes involved some form of driver inattention within three seconds of the event.<sup>5</sup>

The growing mountain of statistics gathered by US researchers and traffic safety experts confirming the danger of text messaging and cell phone use while driving has prompted attention from lawmakers. According to an article which appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, California and the District of Columbia have already outlawed the use of hand-held phones while driving, while as many as 38 states are considering 133 bills that would regulate their use in a motor vehicle.<sup>6</sup>

Given that cell phones and other hand-held electronic devices have become an ever-more important part of our daily lives, it seems some people are having difficulty recognizing when to hang up, including professional drivers. The reckless use of cell phones and text messaging has not decreased despite attention from lawmakers, pressure from insurance companies, and growing public awareness of the issue in the wake of numerous high-profile accidents.

A quick news or Internet search will uncover countless stories about distracted drivers on cell phones killing or

injuring themselves, their passenger(s), another driver, or a cyclist or pedestrian on the side of the road. The story of distracted driving becomes even more disturbing when the people we trust with our public safety succumb to these alarming accident statistics.

While the majority of professional drivers conduct themselves safely and responsibly, in the past year, there has been a spate of incidents where professional drivers have caused accidents by using cell phones or text messaging while driving.

In September 2008, the world of mass transit was rocked by the news that the worst U.S. train crash in 15 years had been caused by an engineer who had been sending and receiving text messages seconds before his crowded commuter train blew through a red light and collided with a freight train. The event, which took place in Chatsworth, California, killed 25 people and injured 135.

In May 2009, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority found it necessary to ban drivers of trains, street cars and buses from using or carrying cell phones in response to an incident where a trolley operator ran a red light and hit another trolley, injuring 49 people. The operator later admitted that he was sending a text message to his girlfriend at the time.

In another stunning incident that recently hit the news, a San Antonio VIA Metropolitan Transit driver was recently caught on video driving through rush hour traffic while texting.<sup>7</sup> The driver slammed into the back of an SUV, injuring the driver. The bus also had two handicapped passengers onboard. In the video, driver Adrian Perez was texting for almost six minutes prior to the crash.

VIA Metropolitan Transit reports that it has fired three bus operators in the last few months after drivers were caught on video tape using their cell phones.<sup>8</sup> One driver was reportedly caught texting not once but five times during his route, and another was caught driving 65-miles an hour while texting.<sup>9</sup> Since the surveillance cameras were installed on the buses in June of 2008, several other videos have been released where drivers

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1. Edgar Snyder & Associates. *Car Accident Cell Phone Statistics*. (<http://www.edgarsnyder.com/auto-accident/auto/cell/statistics.html>)
2. Transport Research Laboratory. *Dangers of Texting While Driving*. ([http://www.trl.co.uk/facilities/driving\\_simulation/case\\_studies/dangers\\_of\\_texting\\_while\\_driving.htm](http://www.trl.co.uk/facilities/driving_simulation/case_studies/dangers_of_texting_while_driving.htm))
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5. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). *100-Car Naturalistic Driving Study*. (<http://www.nhtsa.gov/portal/site/nhtsa/>)

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7. Bus Driver Texting Crash. ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCHdZxO4\\_tQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCHdZxO4_tQ))
8. Count on News2. *Caught on tape: Texting San Antonio bus driver responsible for violent crash*. ([http://www.counton2.com/cbd/news/national/article/caught\\_on\\_tape\\_texting\\_san\\_antonio\\_bus\\_driver\\_responsible\\_for\\_violent\\_crash/24182/](http://www.counton2.com/cbd/news/national/article/caught_on_tape_texting_san_antonio_bus_driver_responsible_for_violent_crash/24182/))
9. Ibid.

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have been caught violating VIA policy, allowing the company to intervene and take action.<sup>10</sup>

These incidents are far from isolated. Many organizations that employ professional drivers, from taxi companies to train operators, are increasingly turning to video surveillance as a means of deterring or identifying drivers who place the public at risk through the unauthorized use of cell phones or other electronic devices.

"The human cost, the liability costs, and the cost associated with damage to property quickly illustrate the importance of mobile surveillance in curbing distracted driving," says Ian Radziejewski, President of Seon Design Inc., which specializes in the development of mobile surveillance solutions. "Mobile surveillance cameras provide an immediate deterrent, preventing accidents and saving countless dollars."

Seon Design is the world leader in providing mobile surveillance solutions.<sup>11</sup> Through its extensive experience in the transit industry, the company has witnessed the importance of mobile surveillance in promoting a safe environment for passengers and employees alike. Surveillance footage can also be used to train drivers with real-life scenarios, increasing safety even further. One look at the video of VIA driver Adrian Perez and the message about distracted driving should be clear; yet there are professional drivers on the road today engaged in this risky behavior.<sup>12</sup>

"Surveillance cameras give companies some control by providing insight into their employee's driving behavior," says Radziejewski. "They give companies the opportunity to intervene before it's too late." 

10. Ibid.

11. *The World Market for Mobile Video Surveillance Equipment*. IMS Research, 2007.

12. Bus Driver Texting Crash. ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCHdZxO4\\_tQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCHdZxO4_tQ))

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