

Need Direction in Your Life?

If you feel like you need more direction in your life, have I got good news for you!

But first, some background. LuAnn and I participate in Motorloway, an antique motorcar tour that occurs the first week of June. I always do the driving - because that's what men do - and she always navigates.

She's pretty good, actually. Even so, it's not hard to get lost in unfamiliar territory, so a few weeks ago LuAnn talked me into buying a Garmin Nuvi 360 – a handheld GPS unit.

I liked it right away. All of the frustrating guesswork (some would say the stimulating challenge) of finding your way around a strange city is removed.

It's hard at first to get used to turning off your brain and obeying the unit's vocal commands. We accepted a few instructions at first, but we couldn't resist anticipating what came next and began acting independently. The first few times we did this it did not go well – one rainy night we ended up driving the wrong way on a four-lane one-way street.

A few years ago, I played around with a first-generation rental car GPS, so I was impressed with the improved voice inflections in the current model. It was so conversational (if terse) that I found myself talking back to it.

Or should I say, “her,” because the default voice is female. She uses a very commanding tone when saying things like “Turn left on Main Street,” but if you turn too early or too late, she gets pissy. “Recalculating,” she says in a tired tone that implies “you idiot” at the end of her sentence.

Even that is an improvement over the unit I used several years ago, that would sometimes politely insist on its original route. “Make a legal U-turn at your earliest safe opportunity” it would drone. Make a mistake and it would issue the revised instructions twice in a row without a pause, as if to say, “Are you really this dense?”

For some reason I find it hard to take commands from an electronic device with an irritating woman's voice (no, that's not redundant). I'm evidently not the only one who perceives the default voice that way – thus the descriptor "GPS with PMS."

I haven't read the manual yet, but I know that if you dislike the default voice, some models can be downloaded with celebrity voices like Mr. T, Burt Reynolds or Dennis Hopper. Mr. T evidently can't resist some additional commentary, for example, "Pay attention to what I'm saying!" Or, "Mr. T gonna get you there in one piece!"

As these units become more popular, I'm sure it's just a matter of time before Elmer Fudd, Jimmy Durante or Liberace become available. There is also a way to record your own voice file for the manufacturer and have it downloaded onto the unit. I'm considering submitting LuAnn's voice – it would ease my transition because I'm so accustomed to receiving commands from her.

It would be even more realistic if – when I miss a turn - her voice would shriek, "What are you doing? Why didn't you turn there, are you deaf? You never listen to me! Fine, YOU navigate if you're so smart." The unit would then enter "POUT" mode for a period of time and issue sullen instructions until I performed three consecutive compliant maneuvers. And apologized.

If I continued to misbehave, I would expect the unit to lose its temper and twist my right ear as hard as it could, but I suppose that's asking too much.

As long as we're asking for it all, there could be a profanity option for those of us with navigators who tend to use more colorful language. And a wireless connection with the car's computer could cause the voice to shout "look out!" if the brakes are sharply applied, and maybe some prolonged screaming if the antilock brakes become continuously engaged while driving the wrong way down a four lane one-way street.

Anyway, let's get back to giving you more direction in your life that I promised at the beginning of the column. Now that I'm happy with my GPS, it seems that LuAnn is available.