Earlier this month, the National Safety Council called for a nationwide ban on the use of cellphones while driving, citing overwhelming evidence of the risk of injuries and deaths from driver distraction. California has banned texting behind the wheel and, along with several other states, prohibits the use of hand-held phones while allowing drivers to talk with hands-free devices. But research has shown talking is risky even when both hands are free because the mind is somewhere else.

About four in five cellphone owners make calls while driving, and nearly one in five send text messages, according to a survey by Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. The habit is so deeply ingrained that the likelihood of all-out bans seems practically nil.

Individuals still can make the sensible decision to hang up and drive, but they won't get any encouragement from the wireless industry.

"A sensible, a responsible and a brief phone call, we think, can be made, and sometimes needs to be made, in order for life's everyday challenges to be met," said a senior official of the main industry trade group, known as CTIA-The Wireless Assn.

No business is comfortable telling its customers what to do -- particularly when the advice weighs against its bottom line. It's not surprising, then, that wireless providers have taken the familiar road of denying scientific research and plain common sense.

Studies have shown that cellphone conversations can blind drivers to visual cues, slowing reaction time and situational awareness. Researchers at the University of Utah tested drivers and found that they performed no better, and by some measures worse, while talking on a cellphone than they did when they had a blood alcohol level of 0.08% and were legally drunk. The engineer in the Chatsworth Metrolink disaster that killed 25 people last year sent a text message 22 seconds before the crash; however, it hasn't been established that this was the cause.

Such information is not available on the CTIA website, a parallel universe designed to enable, not inform. It features the "why pick on us?" defense that drivers engage in all manner of distracting behaviors, from eating to applying makeup -- as if one bad habit justifies a worse one. It says "statistics indicate wireless use does not equate to dangerous driving," offering as proof that during a recent period, accidents dropped while the number of drivers and cellphone users was increasing. Because many factors influence crash rates -- such as drunk-driving enforcement and safer highway designs -- it's a specious claim that proves nothing.

In fact, reliable statistics on cell-phone-related casualties don't exist. That's because police agencies keep records differently and because motorists who crash while on the phone rarely admit it. The number of fatalities appears to be large, however. In 2003, researchers at the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis published an estimate of 2,600 deaths a year in cellphone-related crashes. About the same time, experts at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration produced a more conservative estimate of 955 U.S. deaths in 2002 -- a toll they said was sure to grow with rising on-road cellphone use.

Fearing the wrath of the wireless industry and its allies in Congress, federal officials suppressed the NHTSA estimate, which was first reported by The Times in March.

Whatever the actual number, there have been more than enough deaths and bereaved families, and drivers who suddenly became criminals through a seemingly routine act.

Of course, consumers don't have to rely on industry propaganda. They have access to other information, and should be wise enough to trust independent authorities over self-interested business concerns.

But when tobacco companies were dragged into court on charges of deceiving the public about the risks of smoking, their defense, in so many words, was this: We didn't exactly lie, and even if we did, it made no difference because no one believed us in the first place.

Smoking and cellphone use are different things, but temptation comes in many forms. For some drivers, the first thought after starting the engine is who to call or text. Faced with changing bad habits, we're prone to rationalization and selective hearing.

That's why what the cellphone industry says does matter. The appeal of chatting behind the wheel was a big factor in its phenomenal growth. Today, however, most everyone has a cellphone (there are more than 250 million U.S. subscribers), and companies increasingly depend on unlimited calling plans rather than minutes sold to bored commuters. Now that we're all in their pockets, it's hard to see what they would lose by urging us, unequivocally, to hang up and drive. Their message should be that if the call is that important, it's worth pulling over.

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