

# Using technology to help save on gas

Before we get started on saving gas with technology, I did buy the new iPhone 3G and will be reviewing it in my column next weekend. I am dinking with it right now and want to see how the battery holds up and the new GPS performs during a full work week.



John Deans

What has been weighing heavy on my mind over the past few months is the oil situation which has resulted in the doubling of gas prices since early 2007. These high energy prices are hurting families and businesses everywhere.

People living outside Brenham, like us, who own trucks or other large vehicles are making the trips into town count since each round trips costs from \$4-\$8.

I love my Dodge 1500 pickup that I bought new in 2004, but now has over 136,000 miles on it. I wish I could buy another just like it in red, but with the gas mileage in the mid-teens I'm dropping \$800 a month for gas.

After gas hit \$3 a gallon I started looking for a more fuel efficient vehicle. The difference between buying a car now compared to 20 years ago is back then you based your selection from car commercials on TV and reviews in *Car and Driver* magazine.

Today all that research and virtual test driving is done on the Internet. Between ConsumerReports.com, which requires a \$26 annual membership fee, and Edmunds.com, which is

free, perspective car buyers can compare and contrast the vehicles aspects and values on an even keel.

My plan is to retire my trusty truck to the ranch and purchase a small car with at least 40 miles per gallon fuel efficiency. A multi-month online car shopping project led me to check out three cars: the Toyota Prius, Honda Civic Hybrid and the VW Jetta TDI (Turbo Diesel Injection).

I was shocked when I tried to find cars to test-drive last month in Houston. There was not a single Prius or Civic Hybrid on any car dealer lot. You had to put down \$500 just to get on "the list" with hundreds of people already on it to order one of those cars sight unseen.

Once back here in Brenham, Tegeler Toyota had a demo 2008 Prius for me to test drive and get an idea of this new technology. Though there were none to immediately purchase, I was put on the list to hopefully get one by the end of the year, but with no promises.

The Prius is a technological wonder. The primary instrumentation apparatus is a 12-13 inch touch screen color monitor that displayed all vehicle operational statistics and even a backup camera image when you

toggled the small gear shift on the dash into reverse.

The numerous on-board computer components in the Prius manage the dual propulsion sources, the small gasoline engine, and the battery powered electric motor to provide an ever-transitioning but smooth ride.

What immediately struck me was that the door automatically unlocked when you approached the car with the keyless/wireless remote in your pocket. Once inside you just push the "on" button and power up the Prius like booting your computer.

The center-mounted color monitor showed the battery power level and the status of the gasoline engine. When you start the Prius, the gas engine is off and the electric motor gets the car going immediately, but the gas engine starts up and takes over after a few seconds. While cruising downhill or stopping at traffic lights the gas engine shuts down and the electric motor kicks in.

What was really neat to watch was the MPG displayed at an efficient 40-50 miles to the gallon. With a push of a button we could then see the historical color graph that showed our gasoline consumption over time. I was in awe of how technologically advanced the Prius was, but bummed that I

could not immediately purchase the \$25,000 gem.

On the other hand, it gave me time to do more research. After I found out that the battery array in most hybrids like the Prius and Civic have to be replaced after 80,000-100,000 at a cost of around \$3,500, I was glad I was delayed. This pause enabled me to find out what I really wanted, which is the Jetta TDI.

Though the Jetta TDI is not a techno-wiz hybrid, it also does not have the expensive vulnerability of battery replacement. With its clean turbo diesel engine that can even burn bio-fuel, I can get a small car with 17-inch wheels that moves very fast and can get around 50 miles to the gallon on our rural highways!

I put the MPG ratings and difference in gas-to-diesel costs in an Excel spreadsheet to compare those three cars and see how the real cost savings actually calculated out. With the Jetta TDI basically matching the hybrids in fuel economy without the

hybrids' battery issues and less-zippy performance, I went with the Jetta TDI.

Since all these fuel efficient cars are in the \$25,000 range, the difference in cost between them was not an issue. The onboard computer display in the Jetta TDI was not nearly as fancy as the Prius, but with 50 MPG and a fast turbo diesel engine that was touted by Edmunds.com to last 300,000 miles easy, I put in my order last week for the 2009 model which should be in by late August.

Bottom line: High gas prices may be hurting us worse soon, so do your car shopping online and crunch the numbers yourself in Excel to see which gas-saving vehicle keeps you moving the best.

Next week's column: iPhone 3G. *John Deans of DeansConsulting.com is a Brenham area computer networking consultant who can be reached at 289-2233 or John@DeansConsulting.com for questions and comments.*