

Automotive News

By Tim Moran
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Ford vehicles equipped with the Sync feature soon may offer access to telematics services similar to some of those of General Motors' OnStar, a Ford supplier said today.

Consumers will be able to upgrade Sync systems on their own, without visiting a dealership, by means of a portable thumb drive.

The added services will be delivered through the driver's cellular telephone. The upgraded Sync sends a limited amount of data over the voice channel. The data are encoded by software provided by Airbiquity Inc., a Seattle company that already provides so-called "in-band modem" technology to OnStar and other telematics providers.

Modems modulate and demodulate digital data to send it within telephone voice bandwidths.

Ford will update existing Sync systems by sending customers a software upload on a thumb drive that can be plugged into the Sync system's USB port, said David Jumba, Airbiquity senior vice president for global business development. Because drivers' phones are not embedded in the cars, services such as anti-theft or stolen vehicle tracking will not be part of Sync, Jumba said. OnStar and some other telematics providers use embedded cell phone technology in vehicles, allowing them to be tracked with global positioning system data.

More bells and whistles

Airbiquity will use its proprietary VIAaq technology to run telematics services such as concierge assistance or turn-by-turn navigation. VIAaq gathers call data from cell phone network providers. The service can identify a customer by the computer chip number of a phone, making it possible to tailor information to a driver's needs.

The VIAaq service also will pull diagnostic data gathered by Sync from the car's computer during calls and send that information to Ford, which in turn will distribute it to dealers for customer service purposes. Ford Motor Co. executives said at the International Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January that such a vehicle health report would be among Sync's future services.

Jumba said drivers will be offered the services by Ford, not by Airbiquity, and that Ford will choose which telematics services it offers and how it offers them.

Phil Magney, president of the Telematics Research Group in Minnetonka, Minn., said the offering has been expected in the evolving telematics industry.

"The utilization of in-band modem technology for that content is a very efficient method of using the voice channel for sending data," he said.

More two-way communications

Automakers already have the ability to send large amounts of data to automobiles over satellite, radio or other wireless communication networks, but achieving two-way data communications has been expensive and limited. Jumba said wireless modem technology can enable that communication, and Magney agreed.

"They essentially enable the back-channel on a thin-client basis," Magney said.

In thin-client computing, the user's computer -- in this case the SYNC system -- carries only minimal programming. Its features are provided remotely by much more powerful computer servers located elsewhere.

Airbiquity said in October that its aqLink in-band modem software will continue to be used in future generations of OnStar. ATX Group, of Dallas, a rival service provider to OnStar, also is an Airbiquity customer, Jumpa said. So is Continental AG, which provides the Sync system's "black box" electronics to Ford.

No prices were given in connection with the Airbiquity/Sync telematics announcement. In the past, Airbiquity has cited a price of \$3 to \$5 per vehicle to license its software modem technology.