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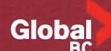


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ROAD WORK AHEAD

Setting up a mobile office starts with the right vehicle

Back in 1936, Chevrolet offered the Standard Coupe Delivery, which had a pickup box for a trunk. Salesmen could use the box for work, and then replace it with the trunk lid for a family vehicle on weekends.

Today, Transport Canada says that as many as 20 percent of drivers use their vehicles for trips directly related to work. Manufacturers are responding with features that can turn them into rolling offices.

Ford, for example, will introduce Work Solutions on its 2009 trucks and vans. These options include an in-dash computer with high-speed Internet access, a radio-frequency tracking system that can inventory products onboard, a fleet dispatch system, and special tool locks.

When you're equipping your personal road office, here are some features to consider:

Telephone connectivity: Almost every manufacturer offers Bluetooth hands-free telephone connectivity in some or all of its models. Some, such as GM's OnStar, also offer an integrated telephone system that uses pre-paid minutes.

Safe, ample storage: The last thing you need is someone making off with your work. Make sure hatchbacks have cargo covers, while sedans with fold-down rear seats should have key locks on the seatbacks, to prevent a thief who gains access to the cabin from being able to easily get into the trunk.

Some vehicles, such as the Acura RDX, include a centre console big enough to hold a laptop, while the sliding load floor on the Dodge Nitro also conceals a computer-friendly space. Look for enough cubbies to keep your PDA, pens and coffee change handy, and a locking glovebox to stash them securely.

Fold-flat front seat: Although they're meant primarily to increase



the available cargo space, a fold-flat passenger seat can substitute as a desk when you're parked and need to set out your laptop or paperwork. A seat with plastic backing won't look as upscale as upholstery, but this easy-clean feature is handy for lunch on the run.

Power outlets: Almost every model has at least one 12-volt outlet, but placement can be crucial: do you prefer it tucked into the console box, where you can safely hide the item being charged, or in the centre stack where it's easy to access, and do you need a vehicle that offers more than one? Increasingly, more automakers are offering 115-volt outlets, which let you charge your laptop. Some are located in the back of the centre console, but many are in the rear cargo area, making them inaccessible from the driver's seat and requiring a longer cord.

A car that fits: Okay, that sounds silly, but many people buy a car after spending only a few minutes behind the wheel. If your

vehicle's going to be a mobile office, make sure the configuration is right – and that means taking your computer and briefcase on the test-drive. Can you balance your laptop on the console, if necessary? Would a telescopic wheel give you more room to sit and make notes?

Is there a handy place to stash your briefcase or purse when there's a client in the car? Now's the time to find the problem areas, not after you've signed on the dotted line; "buy right" from the start, and your car will work as hard as you do.



By Jil McIntosh | Cars & Lifestyle