

Ten Tips for New (and not so new) Owners of a GPS Unit

by Prof. Richard B. Langley

GPS satellite navigation receivers were popular items under the tree this Christmas. There are units designed for hikers, for geocachers, and for boaters and pilots. But perhaps the most common are those for vehicle navigation. While some cars now come with built-in navigation devices, portable types that mount on the windshield or dash are much more prevalent.

And it is these vehicle navigation units that get some drivers into trouble. We've all heard the stories of people getting lost with GPS or ending up on logging roads, railway tracks, or in canals. The problems are usually not with the GPS unit itself but rather with the user of the unit. Here are some tips to help avoid getting lost or being featured on the evening news.

1. Get familiar with your unit before using it in your automobile. Read the user's manual and then try out the different functions at your kitchen table. The latest GPS receivers are sensitive enough to receive a few signals inside a wood-frame building. You might have to get near a south-facing window or out on your balcony or deck to receive enough satellites (a minimum of four) to get a position fix. And don't wait to use it on a big trip. Try it out going to and from work or around your neighbourhood.
2. Mount the device so that its antenna has a clear view of the sky. And choose a location where its screen can be easily seen and where it does not create a blind spot in your field of view. On a long trip, make sure the unit is plugged into the vehicle's 12-volt power outlet as the unit's fully charged battery might only last a few hours. When beginning a trip, first allow the device to acquire satellite signals. Signals will be blocked in an underground garage and by high-rise buildings, so you may have to wait a few minutes after starting out before your position is identified on the screen's map and you begin to get driving instructions.
3. Be careful when selecting or entering a destination, whether it be a town, road, or point of interest. Some places and roads have similar names. People have ended up miles from where they wanted to go by incorrectly programming their device.
4. Don't necessarily select the shortest route when the unit gives you a list of options. The shortest route might include minor roads or even logging trails. Usually selecting the fastest route is the safest option as it likely follows major highways and roads with higher speed limits.
5. Review the selected route before starting out, especially if it is a totally unfamiliar one. Most units allow you to preview a route turn by turn. With the portable devices, you can do this in the comfort of your living room as you don't necessarily need to be receiving satellite signals for planning purposes. It's also a good idea to validate the selected route with an on-line tool such as Google Maps.

6. Keep the map database in the unit up to date. The maps are not perfect and mistakes do creep in. Motorists should report any errors they discover to help with the updates provided by the unit's manufacturer (see <http://www.gps.gov/support/user/mapfix/> for example). And of course, new roads get constructed, interchanges get moved, speed limits change, and so on. Many GPS navigation units now come with free lifetime map updates.

7. Don't blindly follow the voice instructions from a navigation unit. Often the announcement of a turn is made well in advance, so don't turn immediately. That's how people sometimes end up on railway tracks near an intersection. And make sure that you obey all traffic devices including one-way and wrong-way signs despite what you might think your unit is telling you. Common sense should prevail.

8. Remember, it is illegal in many provinces for a motorist to program a navigation unit while driving. Set it up while parked or have a travelling companion do it.

9. If you get into trouble, such as finding yourself unintentionally on an unfamiliar logging road, stop and reverse your direction and find a better route to your destination. Don't doggedly carry on hoping the road will get better. It usually doesn't. And should your vehicle get stuck, use your cell phone to call CAA or emergency services. Most GPS units do not include a tracking function (the built-in or add-on OnStar systems are an exception) so no one will know where you are until you place that call.

10. And lastly, it's a good idea to keep a conventional paper map in your vehicle as a backup. Despite the predictions that maps are going the way of the Rolodex and the floppy disk, they still exist! Make sure you still know how to read one.

Richard B. Langley is a professor in the Dept. of Geodesy and Geomatics Engineering at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton.

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