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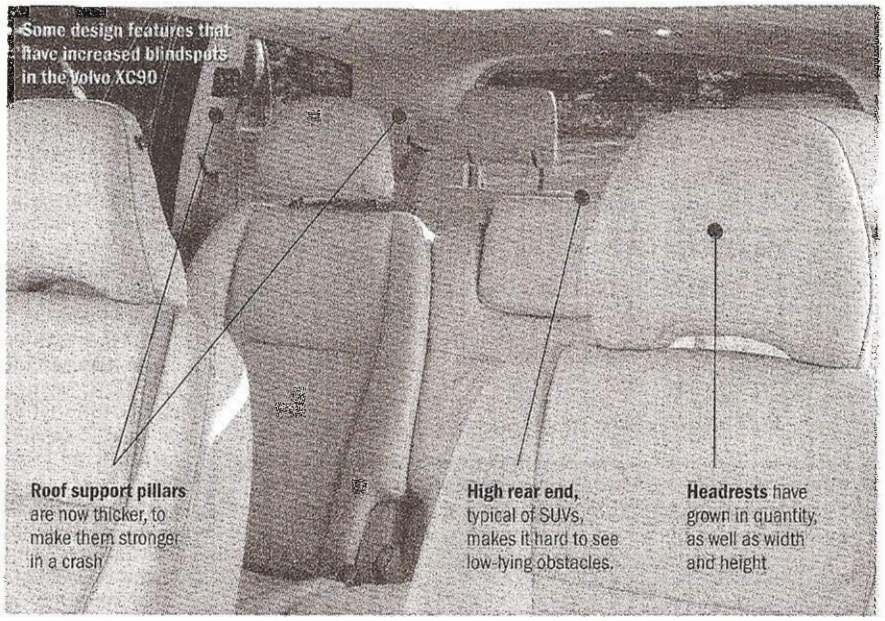

Blind Spots Plague New Car Models

Latest Style, Safety Features Can Block Driver's View; One Fix: Video in the Dash

By Jonathan Welsh

RICK MYERS'S SPORTY new Dodge Stratus is faster and more agile than the 2001 Stratus he traded in. Now, if he could just see out of the rear window.

"The rear end is so high the Queen Mary could tailgate you, and you wouldn't know it," says the Tampa, Fla., technical trainer. "But I haven't hit anything, yet."

Some of the coolest new cars have a problematic feature: bigger blind spots. As vehicles become more stylish and aerodynamic, the windows are shrinking and rear ends are rising, making it tougher for drivers to see what's around them. This isn't only an issue for high-riding SUVs. The small back windows and big headrests in some low-slung models can also obscure objects to the rear or cars in the next lane. Both the Toyota Celica and the Stratus, for instance, have backends that slope upward, sometimes completely blocking the driver's view of cars that are tailgating.

Government agencies and some market researchers worry that the changes are aggravating a continuing safety problem. In 1992, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recorded 533,000 accidents involving motorists in the act of backing up, merging or changing lanes—all classic blind-spot situations. By 2001, that figure had risen 17% to 624,000. During that same period, total crashes (of any kind) rose only 5%.

Some new devices that are supposed to make driving safer are contributing to the reduced visibility. The headrests in SUVs, for example, have not only grown in quantity (it's now common to have five or more, up from two a few years ago) but in width and height as well. While this helps prevent whiplash, it creates new visual interference for drivers to contend with.

Another issue is the expansion of the so-

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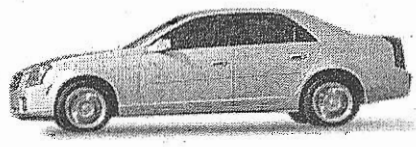
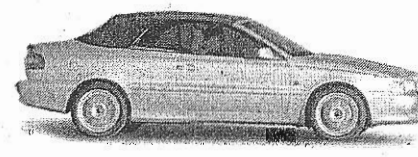
CARS

Watching the Blindspots

A sample of the results from a recent survey that asked drivers how happy they were with their view of their road. Cars whose drivers were most content with their visibility are listed in the "Best" category. Within each group, cars are listed from best to worst.





Best

CAR	PRICE	COMMENT
Lexus LS 430 (shown)	$55,125	Both hood and trunk slope downward, away from line of sight
BMW 5-Series	$37,600	Rear windows are large, allowing driver to see over the relatively low trunk
Porsche 911 Carrera	$68,600	Huge rear window and short rear end result in unobstructed rear view
Jaguar XJ series	$59,330	Rear roof pillars are slim compared with most other cars.

Middling

CAR	PRICE	COMMENT
Cadillac CTS (shown)	$30,140	High rear end gets in the way
GMC Sierra	$19,150	Long, high cargo bed blocks view
Toyota Land Cruiser	$53,955	High driving position makes it hard to see low obstacles
Pontiac Bonneville	$26,695	Large trunk and sloped rear window make it hard to see over rear end

Worst

CAR	PRICE	COMMENT
Volvo C70 convertible (shown)	$39,880	Small rear window, large opaque area between side and rear windows
Isuzu Rodeo Sport	$13,999	High, small rear window
Toyota Celica	$17,340	High rear end, slope of the rear window restricts view
Chevrolet Avalanche	$32,150	Large cargo bed and roof pillars block vision

Sources: Strategic Vision; comments from WSJ reporting

Bigger Blind Spots Plague Many New Car Models

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called side pillar, which connects the roof to the chassis. The Volvo XC90, an SUV, is touted as one of the safest vehicles on the road. But in an effort to make the vehicle's seatbelts more responsive, Volvo added a device to the side pillar, which then had to be widened accordingly. The result is less of an over-the-left-shoulder view. A Volvo spokesman says the move was meant to reduce injuries and make the roof stronger for rollovers. "The sacrifice is some visibility," he says.

Strategic Vision, which does independent consumer research, says 47% of drivers surveyed this year said they were happy with their visibility behind the wheel of their car—down from 52% in 1997. Big sedans generally fared best in the survey—the Lexus LS430 and BMW 5-Series, for example, were widely praised by their owners. At the bottom of the pack were convertibles like the Volvo C70 and big vans like the GMC Savannah wagon. (For a list of some of the best and worst finishers, see accompanying chart.)

Car makers say visibility hasn't been a big source of complaints. They add that design-wise, they're just giving customers what they want. "It isn't something we have been hearing about from customers," says Bryan Zvibleman, a spokesman for **DaimlerChrysler** AG, which includes the Dodge unit.

For customers who are concerned, car companies are beginning to roll out some sometimes pricey solutions. One such remedy: cameras on the rear bumper. wide-angle picture of the area behind the car pops up on a screen in the front seat. The catch, however, is that the cameras work only with cars that already have a built-in navigation system (because those systems come with a screen). The navigation feature can add as much as $2,000 to the price tag of the car. Cameras are available only on a handful of cars at this point, including the Acura MDX and the Infiniti Q45.

Another feature intended to address the visibility problem are "parking assistance" sensors, which are supposed to beep as a backing vehicle nears obstacles. But the sensors, which cost $500 or more, often beep incessantly, even when the vehicle isn't very close to anything. The result is that some drivers tend to ignore them.

Accidents stemming from a driver's obstructed view are typically parking-lot fender benders. While the damage from these low-speed collisions is usually minor, it can be expensive to fix. The average cost to repair a Dodge Stratus (like the one Mr. Myers drives) after a 5-mile-an-hour crash is $689, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, an insurance-industry-funded organization. It costs $1,365 on average to fix low-speed damage to the Isuzu Rodeo.

Even at low speeds, blind-spot accidents can sometimes be far more serious. Janette Fennell, president of Kids 'N Cars, which tracks automotive safety issues affecting children, says 58 children died last year after cars backed ble the number of cases in 2000. She says there may be many more cases, but statistics are hard to come by in part because big safety studies tend to focus on road accidents, not those in driveways or parking lots.

This isn't the first time visibility has taken a backseat to style. In the 1970s, when vehicle regulations grew more stringent, roof pillars were thickened to give passengers more protection in rollovers. That, in turn, compromised the driver's rear and side views. Things improved somewhat in the '80s and early '90s, as cars got boxier, creating space for larger windows. Now, the tide has swung back again, thanks, in part, to motorists' tastes. Despite a sagging auto market, SUV sales are up 7.7% so far this year, while big sedans (which tend to give drivers the best view of the road) are down 5.5%.

Despite the recent stylistic changes, there isn't an inherent contradiction between a car's look and how easy it is to see out of. Car makers, for example, have the materials and technology to make side pillars that are thinner and yet stronger. Over the years, there have been plenty of aerodynamic cars that haven't been tough to see out of.

Some new designs bear this out. While last year's Mercedes CLK was among the highest on the Strategic Vision complaint list for blind spots, the 2004 model due out late this summer has slimmer pillars and a bigger rear window. "Rear visibility was a contributing factor in efforts to make those pillars