

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Salamis, key rings and GM's ongoing sense of humor

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Just when things look so glum for General Motors, what a relief that somebody at the world's largest automaker still has a sense of humor.

In this case it comes from a GM news release about the possibility that the engine on its 2005 Chevrolet Cobalt (built by God-fearing and corn-fed Buckeyes in Lordstown) might inadvertently shut off.

The release was issued in response to a short piece in last Sunday's New York Times that accompanied a generally favorable review of the Cobalt. In the sidebar story, free-lance writer Jeff Sabatini reported that a test Cobalt driven by his wife stalled, apparently after her knee bumped the steering column.

Intrigued, I asked GM in Detroit if there was an official statement. Sure enough there was and it is, please excuse me, a knee slapper, suggesting that an engine that can be inadvertently turned off is not a safety problem.

"In rare cases when a combination of factors is present, a Chevrolet Cobalt driver can cut power to the engine by inadvertently bumping the ignition key to the accessory or off position while the car is running," it begins.

"When this happens, the Cobalt is still controllable," the release says. "The engine can be restarted after shifting to neutral." Incidentally, in a telephone interview a GM spokesman said the steering does not lock when the engine stalls.

So, if you're whisking along at 65 mph or trying to pull across an intersection and the engine stops, that's what you do. Only a gutless ninny would worry about such a problem. Real men are not afraid of temporary reductions in forward momentum.

The chuckles are not over yet.

"GM has analyzed this condition and believes it may occur when a driver overloads a key ring, or when the driver's leg moves amid factors such as steering column position, seat height and placement. Depending on these factors, a driver can unintentionally turn the vehicle off."

The release goes on to say that service advisers are telling customers they "can virtually eliminate" this kind of unintended deceleration by "removing non-essential materials from their key rings."

So this is not an engineering or manufacturing problem, but a problem with clumsy drivers who can't control their knees or with those haunted by stories of the Donner Party who have attached a five-pound salami to their key chain.

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Never mind that Sabatini, the troublemaker who started this, said the key chain being used was provided by GM and included such weighty items as a key fob and a tag identifying the vehicle as being part of Mother GM's brood.

The release concludes with an explanation of the complexity of ignition systems, apparently an appeal to those with an appreciation for an in-depth, technical dive.

"Ignition systems are designed to have 'on' and 'off' positions and practically any vehicle can have power to a running engine cut off by inadvertently bumping the ignition from the run to 'accessory' or 'off' position," it concluded.

GM says it has no consumer complaints and, in fairness, I could only find one complaint filed with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that might match the ignition-switch situation; even that wasn't clear.

But a GM spokesman said two GM employees driving Cobalts have experienced the problem.

There is no evidence it is a widespread problem, but you have to admit it is pretty funny to hear somebody pretend that turning off the engine by mistake isn't a safety issue.

But the record for GM automotive belly laughs belongs to correspondence sent to NHTSA by GM's general counsel Thomas Gottschalk in which he argued that windshield wiper failures on some 2002 and 2003 midsize sport utilities such as the Chevrolet TrailBlazer weren't a safety problem.

Unfortunately, NHTSA apparently does not have a sense of humor: Almost 600,000 vehicles were recalled and the agency scolded GM, accusing it of attempting to conceal a safety defect and suggesting this was not the first time the automaker could have been more forthcoming. Then it fined the world's largest automaker a record \$1 million.

GM said the automaker chose to simply pay the fine to avoid the expense and hassle of a long court case.

Ha.

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