



June 19, 2005

Making a Case for Ignitions That Don't Need Keys

By JEFF SABATINI

CHEVROLET dealers are telling Cobalt owners to lighten their key rings to prevent intermittent stalling and the loss of electrical power in their cars. General Motors issued a service bulletin to dealers suggesting this fix.

"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," Alan Adler, a manager for safety communications, said. "Service advisers are telling customers they can virtually eliminate this possibility by taking several steps, including removing nonessential material from their key rings."

During my time with the Cobalt, I encountered the problem once, or rather, my wife did. She was driving on a freeway when the car "just went dead," in her words. She recalled bumping her knee against the steering column just before the car shut off. She was able to coast to the shoulder of the road, where, once parked, the car started and behaved normally.

The only things on the ring, other than the key, were the fob for the remote locking system and a tag identifying the car as G.M.'s - just as the key ring was given to me.

Though my wife was able to continue to her destination, I wanted a dealer service department to look at the car. Young Chevrolet Oldsmobile Cadillac, in Owosso, Mich., found nothing wrong, but did share the service bulletin.

Curious whether this experience was indeed rare, I searched the Internet for others who had encountered the same problem. I found a newspaper review describing the writer's experience with a Cobalt that unintentionally shut off.

"Unplanned engine shutdowns happened four times during a hard-driving test week," Gary Heller wrote in The Daily Item of Sunbury, Pa., on May 26. "I never encountered anything like this in 37 years of driving. I hope I never do again."

Mr. Adler said that G.M. did not currently consider this situation a safety issue. "When this happens, the Cobalt is still controllable," he said. "The engine can be restarted after shifting to neutral. 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."