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Satnavs will tell drivers more than just where to go

In-car navigation systems will soon be providing motorists with a far wider range of information.

Story Ben Woodhead

The next time you're trapped in traffic wondering when the queue of cars in front of you is going to start moving, your satellite navigation system may provide the answer.

This year motoring authorities and satnav system makers will start offering a range of data services that will update drivers on anything from traffic conditions to weather.

Chief among them is what's known as a traffic messaging channel (TMC), which broadcasts up-to-the-minute information on road conditions and is set to turn satnav devices from a handy, occasional tool into an indispensable commuter aid. Or at least that's the sales spin.

Manufacturers such as Mitac, says the company's Australian director of sales and marketing Marcus Fry, will give satnav owners a reason to upgrade their gear.

"What's going to grow this marketplace and keep giving the end user a reason to either buy into, or buy back into a new navigation system, is going to be connectivity, and content is going to be the real driver," Fry says.

"That's content such as fuel prices, traffic information, hotel availability or restaurant details and menus."

Mitac owns two of Australia's most popular GPS brands, Navman and Mio, and competes with the other dominant manufacturer in the market, TomTom.

Mitac and TomTom will both offer traffic messaging on their satnav products this year and the two companies plan to use the SUNA traffic messaging channel offered by Victoria's Intelematics.

Intelematics' general manager of traffic and content, Brian Smith, believes Australians will buy about a million stand-alone or in-car satnav systems in 2008 and thinks

that by year's end up to half of all GPS units sold will come with TMC.

"After full availability on the east coast we'd be looking for traffic uptake initially in the 25 to 50 per cent of units sold," he says.

"In the in-car market, once the manufacturers come on board, if we take Europe as an example it's virtually impossible to buy a navigation system that doesn't have traffic."

Melbourne satnav owners can already tune into SUNA and the channel will launch in Sydney and Brisbane next month.

Smith hopes that services will go live in Adelaide, Perth and major regional centres such as the Gold Coast and Wollongong in time for Christmas. The service will then spread out across the country reaching

GPS . . . incoming message.

down to towns with a population of about 20,000.

That may mean a bit of a wait for some, but the good news for GPS owners is that the bulk of devices on the market or already sold are "traffic-ready", which means with a few tweaks they'll receive a TMC.

TomTom Australia and New Zealand's marketing manager Chris Kearney says that all of the products the company has sold here are capable of taking TMC, but many would



require an add-on receiver to pick up messages.

The FM receivers, which clip onto GPSs in much the same way as existing Bluetooth attachments, are likely to be sold with a lifetime subscription to the SUNA service, but pricing is not yet finalised.

(Bluetooth connections through a mobile phone will be required to pick up other data broadcasts such as weather reports, hotel locations or fuel prices.)

In Europe TomTom TMC add-ons cost between €50 (\$85) and €100, giving some indication of likely Australian prices, Kearney says.

Mitac's Fry says the company has similar plans to sell TMC add-ons and all-in-one devices with lifetime SUNA subscriptions.

As is the case with most brands, owners of Navman and Mio GPSs sold before the launch of TMC will need to upgrade the software in their devices before they can receive traffic messages.

The situation is similar for owners of higher-end cars that are fitted with built-in GPS systems.

In many cases car makers switch off the software feature that allows in-car systems to receive traffic messages, meaning that a trip to the dealer's service centre can restore the function. But some low-end car makers remove the TMC receiver hardware entirely to save a few dollars, so owners will have to buy a stand-alone unit or purchase a new car.

The final thing drivers need to know, Mio Technology Australia's marketing manager Daniel Antonello cautions, is that TMC will not put an end to traffic jams.

"The key messaging is for people to remember that it's not a crystal ball," Antonello says.

"The technology that you're buying is not going to guess or pre-empt where the traffic is, it's going to alert you to major incidents that are ahead on the road."