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Autonomous vehicles enter public eye after lengthy waiting period

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Piloted Audi A8 L W12 at Berlin Film Festival

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Thanks to German automakers Mercedes-Benz and Audi, the general public is starting to see autonomous vehicles become a reality after years of mostly behind-the-scenes progress.

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Even at the beginning of the decade, autonomous vehicles seemed more like an idea out of science fiction than an imminent reality, but development by Google and other tech companies and automakers has gradually brought the possibility to light. While the race will continue for years, consumers are getting their first look at the not-so-distant future.

Auto-pilot

On Feb. 16, Audi brought actor Daniel Brhl to the red carpet at the Berlin Film Festival in an A8 L W12 model without a driver. While the star at a red carpet is usually an actor or other industry professional, Audi's "chauffeurless" vehicle also got its fair share of attention.

The vehicle was not merely a model rigged for simple tasks or to give the appearance of autonomy. The A8 picked up Mr. Brhl and model Felicitas Rombold from their hotel in Berlin and took them to the Berlinale Palast, one of the festival's venues.



Driverless Audi A8 on the red carpet

An Audi release on the happening explains that the vehicle found its way by registering "prominent architectural features" such as distinct buildings along the driving route, cross-checked that information with its internal mapping

capabilities and then synchronized the data with its own calculations of its movements.

Additionally, the ride was reportedly smooth, with modulated rather than sudden braking and acceleration to closely mimic human actions.

Two major concerns often lobbed at driverless vehicles is that a machine could not successfully replicate human nuances and behavioral patterns, such as gradual braking and acceleration or easing into the intersection to prepare for a turn, or operate on roads filled with human drivers. The successful A8 drive suggests that these problems are already being addressed successfully.



Audi A8 L W12

By opting for a flashy reveal, Audi likely caught the eyes of a number of consumers, including those not entrenched in the auto world. At the same time, the Berlin Film Festival premiere likely assured an affluent audience.

The targeted and buzz-worthy strategy likely endeared the brand to the right crowd, who are now more inclined to see Audi as a leader and also a brand with an interest in culture, thereby endearing them to like-minded consumers.

At the same time, Mercedes-Benz took a different approach to cornering the autonomous vehicle market, opting for transparency and information over extravagance. The brand revealed on Facebook that its new E-Class has become the world's first standard-production vehicle to receive a test license for autonomous driving in the state of Nevada, with plans to transition to road traffic in California next year.

The message is accompanied by a video, which begins with Dr. Michael Hefner, head of driver assistance systems at Mercedes-Benz saying that we are closer to autonomous vehicles than most people realize.



New Mercedes E-Class

Aware that many consumers are still nervous about the safety and effectiveness of such technology, the video opts for full transparency and explanation. Mr. Hefner explains the capabilities of the E-Class and the technology that makes it possible while the video shows how each process or feature would look from the driver's seat.

Different cameras connected to the cruise control monitor the speed of surrounding vehicles, the speed limit, and even calculate whether it can safely make a lane change. Although Mr. Hefner says the process is only semi-autonomous, as drivers must keep their hands on the wheel in case something begins to go wrong, the vehicle is theoretically capable of driving itself.

In the video's final minute, Mr. Hefner shows off the test license for the state of Nevada and explains that they are testing the steering pilot's ability to decelerate and accelerate coming out of and heading into curves, respectively, and come to a gradual stop at intersections contained in the vehicle's mapping data.

The new E-Class on the road to autonomous driving - Mercedes-Benz original

Along with the video and news update, Mercedes has also added a page to its Web site explaining the benefits of autonomous driving and Mercedes' history with it. Since last year, the brand's Actros with Highway Pilot trucks operate semi-autonomously on German motorways, giving "drivers" time to finish paperwork.

In the article, Mercedes cites projections and studies from the Department of Aerospace Engineering at the University of Bristol, claiming that fully autonomous "cybercars" will not become everyday sights until 2030, when "pods" offering on-demand transportation could replace bus journeys, saving time, space and energy in the process.

By 2040, a 40 percent decrease in insurance claims is predicted, and automobiles will resemble mobile lounges as different from today's as today's automobiles are from carriages, taking on new shapes and design.

As autonomous vehicles become ubiquitous, demand for parking spots will decrease (in part due to a move from fuel to electric powertrains), and even 10 percent market penetration will lead to noticeable improvement in traffic.



Mercedes E-Class

By informing consumers, skeptical or otherwise, of the advantages of autonomous driving, Mercedes also positions itself as a leader in the field and a brand that will help make these possibilities a reality. Although such vehicles are still far from the market, such a message creates positive sentiment and positions Mercedes as a forward-thinking and socially conscious brand, values whose positive effects are more immediate.

Future visions

Mercedes has already begun envisioning a future of autonomous vehicles and new designs.

At the 2015 Tokyo Motor Show, the brand began looking beyond the millennial market with its "mobile club lounge."

The "Vision Tokyo" concept model is an electric-powered, autonomous driving vehicle aimed at the urban trendsetters of Generation Z. A variety of technological advances are presenting automakers with enormous opportunities to redefine the luxury automotive market ([see story](#)).

While Audi and Mercedes test their vehicles more publicly, other automakers have opted for less visible approaches to work out the flaws in autonomous driving.

British automaker Jaguar Land Rover is investing in a "living laboratory" to help develop connected and autonomous vehicles.

Forty-one miles of roads running through Coventry and Solihull in the United Kingdom will be made into a laboratory for testing new connected and autonomous vehicle (CAV) technologies. Although autonomous vehicles are attractive in theory, many consumers still have reservations about the real world effectiveness and driving experience ([see story](#)).