

AUTOMOTIVE

How will Uber tragedy affect luxury autonomous cars?

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Driverless cars come with their own set of risks. Image credit: Aurora

By DANNY PARISI

Automakers were already struggling to get the public on board with autonomous vehicles, but a recent tragedy involving a self-driving Uber car has made the near-future prospects for the idea even more challenging.

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Last week, a woman was tragically killed during an accident involving a test of one of Uber's self-driving cars. Basically every luxury car brand is testing or planning to test driverless cars in the near future, but events such as this will make the idea difficult to sell.

"This incident will motivate researchers and developers to improve the technology to hopefully prevent such tragedies from happening again," said Julie Blackley, communications manager at [iSeeCars](#), Woburn, MA.

Autonomous danger

Last week in Tempe, AZ, an autonomous Uber test vehicle struck and killed a woman as she was crossing the street.

While the investigation is still ongoing as to whether it was the fault of the driverless car, which had a safety driver sitting behind the wheel but was in autopilot mode, it would be the first instance of a death caused by a driverless car.

There was a Tesla driver who died in a driverless car accident, but a later investigation determined that the driver was at fault for ignoring multiple warnings to take control of the vehicle.



Mercedes-Benz's driverless car. Image credit: Mercedes-Benz

In response, Uber halted all nationwide testing of driverless vehicles and the state of Arizona is seeking to limit its ability to do so in the future.

Around the country, the incident has shaken confidence in the safety of driverless cars, an idea that much of the public was already skeptical of.

Uber's role in the driverless car evolution is notable. While consumers are still hesitant to embrace driverless vehicles, the industry's success will lie with autonomous services rather than individual ownership.

The United States is expected to lead the race in production of autonomous technology deployment and production likely by next year, with Europe and China joining in 2021. Ride-sharing economy and mobility services will be the forces that help driverless vehicles takeoff instead of consumers owning these cars themselves ([see story](#)).

But for luxury brands, who are mostly interested in making driverless cars for affluent consumers to purchase, the tragedy involving Uber's self-driving cars will likely have less of an effect.

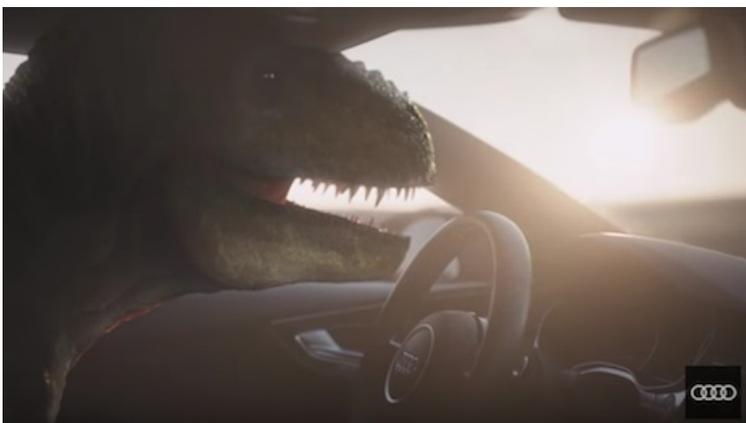
Luxury auto

A quick survey of the top luxury auto brands in the world show that nearly all of them are working on driverless cars, and the recent incidents have not slowed them down at all.

For example, German automaker Mercedes-Benz is anticipating the future shift to autonomous driving with a trip around the world while gaining insights on intelligence technology along the way.

In what the brand is calling the first-ever automated test drive around the world, Mercedes' "Intelligent World Drive" visited five continents. A series of video installments documented the travels online ([see story](#)).

Other auto brands have used humor to make the idea of a driverless car more palatable, such as when Audi cast a short-armed T-rex as the ideal advocate for pilotless driving in a promotional film.



Audi's humorous autonomous car commercial. Image credit: Audi

The automotive industry is neck-in-neck is developing functional, real-world autonomous driving, whether consumers are ready for the advances in technology or not. In Audi's "The Comeback," the automaker shows how autonomous driving can be a revitalizing experience for those tired of their day-to-day reality ([see story](#)).

But despite these efforts, public perception of driverless cars is still very mutable. Brands need to be aware of how

the public views the idea so they can maintain public confidence and avoid appearing insensitive to the real risks of autonomous vehicles.

"Autonomous cars will first be introduced to the marketplace through public services such as ride-hailing and delivery, which will allow consumers to become comfortable with the technology before autonomous vehicles enter the private marketplace," iSeeCars' Ms. Blackley said. "As this is happening, elements of autonomous car technology will be introduced in luxury vehicles, and there will be a gradual shift toward full autonomy."

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