

Blame it on Blake, Part 1: Product designs that are getting worse

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One of my father's favorite sayings, which admittedly he directed at me all too often, was: "You're improving less."

Now that he has passed on, I find myself sometimes saying the same thing. It's usually when I see a product that purportedly has been "improved" in some way but, to my way of thinking, is a step in the wrong direction.



Plastic bumper is an oxymoron.

These changes are so wrongheaded, there's only one explanation for them. There's a young engineer going from company to company messing things up. This person, whose name I'll assume is Blake, has a fresh way of looking at things that seems exciting ... on the drawing board. But Blake hasn't had the life experience necessary to understand the practical implications.

So we end up having to keep our old stuff – as I have with my 1992 Ford Explorer - or surrendering convenience and other benefits and settling for the stuff that has "improved less."

Here are some examples. I invite you to reply with some of your own.

- **Plastic car bumpers.** The only one who could have come up with this idea is someone who has never owned a car. It was bad enough that Reagan Administration eliminated the federal 5-mile-per-hour bumper requirement. Now, metal bumpers have been replaced—or covered with—plastic that chips, scratches, dents, and cracks with just a tap. It's so irritating that people now are spending money on products like the "Bumper Buddy," essentially a bumper for their bumpers. Not only are plastic bumpers impractical, I think they're tacky, adding to the jelly bean look we're seeing in cars nowadays.

- **Disappearance of the telephone speed dial.** I recently tried to buy a new cordless phone and couldn't find a single one that has speed dial, even though

it's one of the most convenient things they ever came up with. Just press and hold one button momentarily, and you're done.

Instead, this feature is being replaced with the electronic phone book, which requires a multistep process anytime you want to call a stored number. For Blake, who's accustomed to using cell phones, this is just the way the world works. But why not keep speed dial for the most used numbers and a phonebook for the rest, like my old Uniden model?

- **Squeezable condiment bottles.** Squeezable mustard and mayonnaise bottles make sense ... if you don't care about getting every last bit out of the container. This isn't an issue for our young engineer, who has yet to learn the value of money. (Our [Consumer Reports](#) study of such packaging showed that up to [25 percent of some products gets left behind](#) in these types of containers!) It's such a bad idea that companies have forced Blake to redesign the bottle tops so they're flat, allowing the products to be stored precariously upside down in the hope that gravity will supply what the absence of common sense took away. Why don't they just admit their mistake and return to wide-mouth jars?

Blame it on Blake, part 2: Product designs that are getting worse

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Dark car interiors. More carmakers are letting you choose any interior color you like—as long as it's black or grey. I suppose this troglodytic approach to interior design is due to the Goth influence on Blake or maybe Blake's passion for those dirty or wet extreme sports. One thing's for sure, Blake never has sat on a dark car seat on a hot summer day.



Looks cool but feels hot.

- **Plastic clamshell packaging.** What ever happened to the good old cardboard box? Increasingly, opening packages requires a pair of really sharp scissors, adhesive bandages, a lot of time to kill, and anger management therapy. As we've reported, injuries resulting from attempts to open this type of packaging actually results in [an estimated 6,000 emergency-room visits](#) each year. I guess when you're as young as Blake, you have plenty of time to heal ... physically and emotionally.

- **Goodbye viewfinder.** An increasing number of digital cameras and camcorders no longer have a viewfinder, providing only an LCD. Our young

engineer hasn't been around long enough to appreciate how much better a viewfinder is if you are taking pictures in strong sunlight, wear glasses, or want to examine the photos or videos you took in detail.

Blame it on Blake, part 3: Product designs that are getting worse

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• **Sloping vehicle roof lines.** Having only recently graduated from a child safety seat, Blake doesn't yet understand that drivers need to see out of the vehicle. So now we're stuck with sloping rooflines, colossal roof pillars, and narrow windows that make driving anything but fun or safe.



Bigger blind spot?

• **Disappearing knobs and buttons.** Easy-to-reach, direct-access knobs and buttons are being replaced with menu access dials, remote controls and electronic menus. Need to change the entertainment system settings, check the engine oil, or operate the navigation system while driving a BMW525i? With the complicated iDrive multipurpose controller, it's a challenge to keep your eyes where they should be: On the road.

Similarly, many flat screen televisions now have their controls in the back where they're hard to get at, especially if you've placed the TV in a bookcase. One brand we looked at has a rear-mounted menu access dial. Any front-mounted controls usually are those infernal touch sensors mounted behind flat glossy plastic. Just try figuring out where to press, particularly if the panel isn't at eye level.

Sure, there are buttons on the remote control, assuming you haven't misplaced it. But they launch enough menus and submenus to frustrate even a jumbo jet pilot.

The upshot? By the time granny figures out how to increase the brightness on her 52-inch plasma TV, her show will be in post-syndication.

Incidentally, whatever happened to those TVs with built-in remote-control finders? Press a



Hard to reach, hard to use.

button and your misplaced remote beeps! Now that was an example of a product improving more! Blake?

—*Anthony Giorgianni*