

NewsStand - Teens Wait Longer To Get Drivers' Licenses

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This article appeared in National Oil & Lube News, June 2012

I once read an article about how the behavior of our teen years can often be predictive of what we'll be like as middle aged adults. (Hope that doesn't scare you.) For example, if you were excessively outgoing when young, you will likely be an extrovert later in life. If you were a leader, you would likely find yourself in leadership roles later in life. If you were organized and systematic in your youth, you may not be far from that in your forties and fifties.

I mention all this because it makes me wonder how predictive other behaviors will be. In April an article was forwarded to my attention noting how teens are waiting longer to get their drivers licenses. Evidently some of the statistics have been getting air time and pundits are rushing about trying to explain it.

MSN.com's Detroit Bureau correspondent Paul Eisenstein presented findings by the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute (UMTRI) that indicated how young people are less likely to be licensed than when we were kids. If true, this naturally could have implications for our industry.

Here are the key stats from Eisenstein's reporting. In 1983 a third of all licensed drivers were under age 30. Today that's 22 percent. But the most interesting numbers are these. 69 percent of 17-year-olds in 1983 were licensed, and now it's only 50 percent.

I had two thoughts in regard to this data. First, what's changed? And second, what does it mean for us going forward?

By observing my own two children and their friends I've seen how this has been happening. My son did get his driver's license when he came of age as boys did in my day. But not all his friends were bolting to the Department of Motor Vehicles and it wasn't long before he was the unofficial taxi for his circle. Because he found it awkward asking for gas money when he ferried his friends about in his big old Ford station wagon nicknamed The Boat, we fastened a small money box onto his dashboard with a little sign that did the asking for him.

Gas isn't the only thing that has gone up in price since I was a boy. I remember when adjacent gas stations had price wars at 29.9 cents and 29.8 cents. Car insurance is also a requirement that gets pretty hefty for a teen, or his parents. When we added our son to the policy the price tag was near triple for the insurance, and we only carried liability.

Add to this the cost of repairs and you're starting to look at some real money. A simple tire change costs more than my first car. I'm talking about regular street tires, not a set of Michelin PAX for your Bugatti. The typical brake job today costs twice what I paid for my first car. So car ownership ain't what it used to be.

I mention these details because the MSN.com story suggests that a probable culprit with regard to fewer teens driving is the reduced need for social interaction due to social media and the Internet. "It is possible that the availability of virtual contact through electronic means reduces the need for actual contact among young people," said UMTRI lead researcher Michael Sivak. "Furthermore, some young people feel that driving interferes with texting and other electronic communication."*

Watching my own children and their friends leaves me unconvinced about this. Rather, the biggest influence I see is coming from the increased environmental consciousness and the increased adoption of bicycles and public transportation. My daughter, 23, only drove a car once in her life. That was when she was eleven, steering along a gravel road while sitting on her daddy's lap. Otherwise, it's walking, biking or public transportation for her. Like many young people today, she conscientiously considers the implications of all her decisions from what she eats to where she shops, including the size of any carbon footprints she leaves behind.

Not everyone believes the numbers in those articles. I spoke with a friend who said that the number of kids in Dallas driving without their licenses has been greater than ever. And as we know from all the new legislation regarding "inattentive driving," smartphone use has not kept young people off the highways.

Another contrarian I spoke with noted that of the near 12 million illegal aliens in our country a certain percentage of these are no doubt driving but may find registering for a license problematic.

Concluding Thoughts

Whatever the real story behind all these speculations, there are a few things we know for certain. (1) Change is generally slow. This is a good thing because it gives us ample time to make adjustments to emerging trends. (2) Green attitudes are here to stay. It's a recurring theme in the public schools and many young people are taking it to heart. Recommending extended drain intervals with a premium synthetic helps reduce the amount of oil being disposed of.

There is one other behavior I've seen among teen drivers that has an impact on our industry. Many of these kids are not learning basic maintenance behaviors such as routinely checking fluid levels. Many don't have a clue where to even find the dipstick. For all teens I would recommend premium synthetic oils for no other reason than because their neglected engines need protection and synthetics protect better and longer when the kids have other things on their minds.

Let's teach our children well.