

No Cause for Alarm

Car alarms suck. They're a bad implementation of a questionable design, and the result is a device that fails in its appointed task while annoying everyone within earshot while it does so. But I'll tell you how they can be fixed.

The idea underlying the Satanic devices is that a car thief startled in *flagrante delicto* by a klaxon will abandon his attack. This is only true if the car alarm possesses the element of surprise. These days with every upscale moped wailing uncontrollably if a bird passes too near, thieves understand the possibility of exciting a cars noisemakers and take precautions. A successful car thief can probably silence an alarm faster than the owner. Judging by the fumbling responses of car owners when they set off their own alarms, squelching a car alarm in less than two painful minutes is probably suspicious behavior.

People have become inured to the shrieking pestilence of alarms. Any parking lot contains several badly-adjusted car alarms that will begin their painful wailing whenever a sparrow invades their airspace. One must learn to ignore them in simple mental self-defense. No one in a major city would consider calling the police or even investigating a ringing alarm, although they may attempt to disable it.

The situation parallels the baby-boomer children who run amok in restaurants; their owners have adjusted them badly, causing a disturbance to others. In neither case is it polite to take out a screwdriver or soldering iron and make appropriate adjustments yourself.

In the case of misbehaving children, one usually has the option of trying to convince the parent that they're out of line. Not so with a car alarm. The owner is rarely present, and if so usually busy dropping their keys or suffering a coronary.

If you think about it for a moment, you realize this is the worst design flaw in the car alarm. In most cases, the only person who cares that the car is being molested can't hear the signal. Those who can hear it usually only want the noise stopped. I'll bet that more people would loan a thief a tool to disable the alarm than report him to the cops.

Furthermore, the owner is never around when the misadjusted alarm is set off every 10 minutes by gentle breezes. The feedback that should tell them their alarm is misconfigured reaches only uninterested parties, like me trying to enjoy the sun.

Fortunately, technology has advanced, and I use the term very loosely, to the point where we can finally address this problem. My informal survey has shown that the owners of the loudest and most obnoxious car alarms are the same people who cannot operate their vehicles without simultaneously operating their cell phones. Configure the car alarm to call them and squeal into the cell phone rather than the air.

The silent phone call restores the car alarm's advantage of surprise. The owner is alerted by the car, leaving the thief blissfully unaware that they've been tripped up. If the owner believes that the threat is genuine, he simply dials 911 and reports a theft in progress to the police. This means that untrained bystanders are less likely to damage the alarm while assisting thieves in disabling it, too.

The owner's the one who needs to know that the car is being invaded, and the phone routes that information directly to the interested party. More importantly, it directs the false alarms to the owner as well; rather than interrupting my afternoon break, it interrupts theirs. If they get too many false alarms, they can get the alarm readjusted. Either way, I'm annoyed less.

I'm sure someone has realized that alarms could just eliminate the middleman by dialing 911 directly. I wouldn't wish that on the police, because I think most alarms are false. The only way I would consider it is if the cops are allowed to issue Disturbing the Peace citations for excessive calls. Or if they're allowed to just shoot the car.