

OUR VIEW

25 MAR 07

By The Tribune Editorial Board

Don't phone, drive

Multitasking slows the brain

Multitasking at the wheel of a car could kill you or someone else.

That's one theme of a recent story in *The New York Times* that examined new research on the effects of multitasking on productivity. It noted that when the brain is called upon to perform two tasks at once, it slows down. To put it another way, the brain's processing time increases.

Researchers found that responses to sounds and images were delayed by up to a second when the participants in a study were given two tasks to perform at the same time.

This can be deadly when the two tasks are driving a car and talking on a cell phone. One researcher noted in *The Times* that a one-second delay in brain response doesn't matter much in most daily tasks. But if you're traveling at 60 mph, that delay could be fatal.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration puts it another way. Its questions and answers on cellular phone use during driving include this:

"Research shows that driving while using a cell phone can pose a serious cognitive distraction and degrade driver performance. The data are insufficient to quantify crashes caused by cell phone use specifically, but NHTSA estimates that driver distraction from all sources contributes to 25 percent of all police-reported traffic crashes."

So is it safe to use hands-free phones while driving?

"The available research indicates that whether it is a hands-free or hand-held cell phone, the cognitive distraction is significant enough to degrade a driver's performance. This can cause a driver to miss key visual and audio cues needed to avoid a crash."

Consequently, the agency's official policy on driving while phoning is no surprise. Safety is the primary responsibility of a driver, it says, and the task of driving requires full attention and focus. "Cell phone use can distract drivers from this task, risking harm to themselves and others. Therefore, the safest course is to refrain from using a cell phone while driving."

Judging by the number of Utahns who drive while phoning, most people in this state don't believe this. These folks think they are competent enough to talk on the phone and drive safely at the same time. But research on the way the brain works says otherwise. Utah drivers ignore this at their peril, and everyone else's.