

Dashboard Cameras – Useful Tools or Just Toys?

The first question to deal with here is what are dashboard cameras and how do they work? An in-car camera, also known as a dash-cam, is a type of video camera that is specifically designed with tailored features for recording continuous footage of the road ahead, and behind in the case of dual camera system. Dash cams have a loop-recording feature which means that the dash-cam will record until the storage memory-card, integrated into the camera, is full following which time it will then start to record new videos over the oldest files; this means that you do not need to delete or download files but simply to keep driving.

The majority of the better specified devices include important additional features, accurate GPS positioning, G-shock sensors to enable high integrity recording and retention of the file in the case of an incident, HD video to enable accurate information to be derived from the recording and a Park-mode which allows the system to monitor your car whilst it is parked. Some systems include a small viewing screen however these can be a distraction and are not essential as newer systems now include a Wi-Fi feature that allows the user to set the system up and view stored files via their smartphone or tablet.

Dash cams can be professionally installed so losing the power supply cable to the main forward-facing camera and the second integrated video-power lead for a rear view camera, pretty important if you do have a two camera system. If you are less worried about trailing wires you can simply use the supplied cigarette lighter socket to power the unit, either way a littler care can make for a neat installation without much cost of time. New systems battery drain on the car battery is very small so the units can be connected directly to the battery allowing for continuous twenty four hour a day recording however in such mode it is wise to include a voltage safety system which will switch the unit off should the battery voltage drop below a safe level for the cars operation. These items are often sold separately to the dash-cam kit so should be considered as a part of the cost of acquisition.

So that's what the systems are, and there are many from the low cost, (seen as low as £19.99 in the Sunday papers), to quality two camera systems for around £300. This is an area where you do simply get what you pay for, low cost is predominantly low quality recording with minimal features which may mean the detail you are recording is of little use to you in the event you need it. You need to consider spending at least £150 for a basic system and should err on the higher side if you can. When it comes to evidence, having the right quality of image is critical. The Police will not support a complaint or information presented where the evidence is not clear and irrefutable, so some caution is needed when choosing your camera. The question now to answer is "why should I have a dash-cam"?

There are many reasons for a person to have a credible good quality dash-cam fitted to their vehicle:

- A number of insurance companies contacted by me prior to writing this article were willing to offer owners of dash-cams a reduction in their premiums though interestingly "Surety" are still in the stage of establishing what they are going to do though they admit they will be doing something in the future!
- In the event of your car being involved in an incident, be that one whilst the vehicle is stationary or the vehicle is in motion, you would have absolute forensic information regarding the incident rather than the adrenaline fuelled recollection of what you "thought" had happened.
- With a system recording whilst the vehicle is parked "accidental" collisions with your vehicle would be recorded and you would be able to identify any "hit and run" drivers or pedestrians who scratch or damage your vehicle.
- Should you be a DFA or simply assisting at an incident it is likely that your camera(s) would record what was happening, again giving what could be used as forensic evidence or information for the police or other emergency agencies.

You can see from the list above that having accurate GPS location of the camera, and thus your vehicle, as well as HD recording is critical to the value of the recorded information. Without GPS, the system does not have an accurate position; an absolute time index and therefore accurate vehicle speed information; without HD it may not be possible to effectively identify the vehicles or people involved in the incident being recorded thereby rendering the information much less effective than you may want. As has already been stated “this is an area where you do simply get what you pay for”!

There are many sources for dash-cams from high street stores such as Maplin through to Amazon and organizations such as Police Witness, (www.policewitness.com). The latter not only sells good quality systems but also, if the system is bought from them, integrates into the supply, membership of their organization providing a reporting scheme allowing you to bring bad or dangerous driving, anonymously should you wish, to the police. Such evidence is reviewed and has resulted in many cases of prosecution. How many times have we just wished that there was a police car watching the example of bad or dangerous driving that we have just seen, now perhaps there is a way to overcome the lack of “feet on the street”?

One of many examples of where a dash cam has helped in improving the quality of driving:

Dangerous driver disqualified for twelve months.

On 8.10.2013 at Hinckley Magistrates Court, Ryan Stevens was sentenced after pleading guilty to the following offences: Drive a motor vehicle dangerously on 8.3.2013. The defendant must comply with the following requirements by 7.10.2014: Unpaid Work Requirement: Carry out unpaid work for 60 hours within the next twelve months. This work will be supervised by the responsible officer. To pay victim surcharge of £60.00. To pay costs of £85.00 to the Crown Prosecution Service. The driver is also disqualified for holding or obtaining a driving licence for 12 months.

This prosecution was brought about with interaction between PoliceWitness.com and Leicestershire Police. PoliceWitness.com chairman Matt Stockdale said “We are delighted that one of our members has helped to rid our roads of another dangerous driver by reporting the incident in a timely manner through our online reporting system. In doing so giving both ourselves and the police access to the video evidence that ultimately was responsible for this positive outcome. Law abiding motorists have had enough of those who flout the law and put other people’s lives at risk, this result shows that we can work together to help the police, even if they haven’t witnessed the offence themselves. We hope, through hearing about this case where video footage has been crucial to the successful prosecution, people will be able to see the value of in-car cameras and how we can take a stand against irresponsible road users.”

The value of dash-cam systems is in their use. Having a “spy in the cab” may not be everyone’s “taste” however as Advanced Drivers this should not be an issue for us and the additional information that is being recorded can not only be useful in terms of reduced insurance premiums but also could be a positive contribution to the protection of your vehicle and your no-claims bonus as well as potentially bringing bad and dangerous drivers to book.

Dr. Jonathan Hughes
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