

I've been thinking...



Beep. Beep.
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I've been thinking about beeps, rings, and dings.

As a kid, I couldn't wait for weekends. Monday through Friday the parents tried to get us to start the day on NBC with *Ding Dong School*. Miss Frances, the Mister Rogers of the 1950s, opened each snoozer of a show by ringing an annoying handbell. The ritual almost cured me of television. However, Saturday morning's *Looney Tunes* revived my confidence in the tube. Almost in a trance, my brother and I guffawed and groaned as Road Runner perpetually escaped justice. In vain we longed for just one episode in which Wiley E. Coyote would capture and devour the wiry desert fowl whose obnoxious "Beep! Beep!" drove us nuts. Somewhere tucked into all that were the ominous, but thank God, occasional flatline signals from the Emergency Broadcasting System. We were relieved they were only tests and that the Russians hadn't pushed the button.

As technology has evolved, beeps and dings have become ubiquitous. And as I have matured, as annoying as they can be, I have come to appreciate the value of these attention-getters when they sound off in my home, my car, and the hospitals I visit.

Take this morning, for example. I'm in the kitchen reading the sports page when I hear a beep—the microwave's done warming up my hot chocolate. Like Pavlov's pup, I suspend reading to get my cocoa. Another beep goes off as I'm digging into the business section of the *Seattle P.I.*—the dishwasher's drying cycle has finished. Of course, I'll ignore that one. A third beep lets me know I have a message on my cell phone. Hmm. Gotta weigh that one.

Beeps help us live more efficiently. They also help us live more safely.

About noon, I'm pulling out of the driveway on my way to the SeaTac airport, when *ding, ding, ding* promises not to let up until I fasten my seat belt. Within minutes, another arresting beep tells me I'm low on fuel, prompting me to reason that running out of gas on the freeway could disappoint my client in Omaha. (I remember my friend's dad suggesting that "idiot lights" were named that for a reason.)

Well, I made it to the airport and am writing this during takeoff. I am momentarily leaning on old-fashioned pen on paper as my laptop is properly stowed in the

overhead bin. The *ding* giving me freedom to move about the cabin has yet to sound.

Beeps and dings are also useful in helping caregivers in hospitals deliver medications more efficiently and safely. Touchtone keypads on automated dispensing machines (ADMs), for example, let users know their key presses are successful—same as telephones.

Failure to close the drawer of an ADM triggers a beep that will persist until closed—helping to ensure drug security, control, and accountability.

At the point of care, *beeps* not only assure nurses that their scanners have succeeded in reading the bar codes, but they also:

- Prompt caregivers when tasks are due
- Remind caregivers when tasks are past due
- Warn caregivers when there might be a problem needing special attention
- Interrupt caregivers when they are about to do something wrong
- Notify caregivers that they cannot proceed until they get it right
- Assure patients that their caregivers are doing the right thing

Believe it or not, some people are annoyed by all the noise and turn these notification functions off—foolish, in my opinion. These beep-and-ding bells and whistles on medication-use technologies are friends, not foes, that actually save time and sometimes save lives.

OK. I just heard a ding. In a moment, a flight attendant is going to tell me this would be a good time to save my work, power down, and stow my laptop.

I will bring my seat to its full upright and locked position for landing. Yes, I will remain seated during taxi. And, with the rest of Pavlov's ancestors, at the sound of the final ding, I will unbuckle my seat belt and gather my belongings.

No doubt, contents in overhead bins will have shifted. Oh, well, it's Friday. If I'm lucky, some beeping satellite orbiting the earth is getting ready to beam Road Runner to a television near me come morning.

What do you think?



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