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Is there junk in your trunk right now?



By Larry Armstrong for USA TODAY

Kelley Styring photographs contents from Paul Weinberger's 2006 Lexus. She's on a seven-city quest to find out what people keep in their cars.

By [Chris Woodyard](#), USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — Wearing latex gloves, Kelley Styring picks through the interior of a Chevrolet Malibu like a *CSI* technician searching for clues.

The contents — every candy wrapper, napkin or torn-up plastic foam cup — is laid out on a sheet, logged and photographed as owner and paid volunteer Dennis Shaffier looks on. Passersby in the Northridge Fashion Center's garage glance nervously as if they'd come upon a crime scene.

They haven't. Styring, a market researcher, is on a seven-city swing to study what people carry around in their cars. Armed with her inventories and a survey of hundreds more car owners, she hopes to tell the auto and products makers sponsoring her work what they're doing right or wrong.

Do moist towelettes stay moist in a hot car? Where do people squirrel away all the extra house keys she keeps unearthing in cars?

And those "cup" holders? "Lots of things end up in cup holders," Styring says. She's found coins, a golf ball, gloves and an air freshener, to name a few.

Cupless cup holders are significant. A feature co-opted for other uses is a product design boo-boo, says Styring. She likens it to aluminum cans piled by trash cans — crying for their own recycling bin.

Her research also may validate automakers' hunches, since they have been trying hard to put more useful storage spaces in vehicles.

Styring is no rookie. A Procter & Gamble and Frito-Lay research veteran, she views the chance to root through strangers' cars as a perfect encore to her study that involved emptying 100 women's purses. She found things from long-lost baby photos of grown children to a porn receipt (neither of which the owners recalled having in their bags).

One marketing insight from the purse survey: The most popular hand lotion brands were not in purses because those brands didn't make attractive travel sizes. The detective work led to a book, *In Your Purse: Archaeology of the American Handbag*.

Such painstaking inventories are important in verifying what consumers tell market researchers, says Becky Ebenkamp, West Coast bureau chief for *Brandweek*, who came to see Styring.

"People lie," she says. "I don't believe 80% of the market research because people tell you what you want to hear, what they think about themselves."

Styring won't name her sponsors, but by her questions, it sounds like one sells moist towelettes. And Honda lent her an Odyssey minivan for her travels. As of Tuesday, she had inventoried 15 of the 21 cars in this stop, each taking about two hours.

The hunt sometimes yields marketing pay dirt.

For instance, Styring seemed intrigued by the box of Altoids mints that Shaffier, 52, an architectural designer, had in his 2001 Malibu's console. She was impressed by Altoids' packaging, its metal box. That packaging, which seems durable and appropriate for a car, worked for purses as well, she found in her earlier work. Women liked Altoids because the rattle of mints in the box made them easier to find than competing breath mints.

In Shaffier's car, Styring also discovered a single piece of yellow Skittles candy rolling around under the front seats, and half a cashew. A wad of napkins was stuffed in the door pocket. A coffee cup graced the console. Conclusion: This guy may eat in his car more often than he said in the pre-search interview.

She wondered whether she might be able to advise fast-food operations not to hand out bunches of napkins with every purchase. It appears motorists are fine with just a couple — and wouldn't have to squirrel away or discard the rest.

As do purses, cars become repositories for mystery items. A curious smile sweeps the researcher's face when she comes across a broken CD of karaoke music in Shaffier's Malibu. Shaffier was just as mystified. "That broken CD, that's mine? I don't know who put that in there," he said.

It looked like the inventory might go quicker when Jeannette Dow, 55, pulled up. She had a 2002 Toyota Tacoma pickup with an empty bed. But Dow, too, had lots of flotsam that had built up over time.

A teacher and marathoner, Dow says a truck she owned a few years ago was so messy she would let the filth build up, then just cover it over with a new layer of carpet. "It was like strata," she says.

Styring seizes on the leash that Dow has wrapped around the passenger seat to use as a seat belt restraint for her Australian cattle dog, Angel.

"I'm desperately in love with the dog harness. It's a whole product line waiting to be developed," Styring says.

Another opportunity for a smart automaker: Dow loves to clip coupons but has no good place in the truck for them, so they are stuck on the console with a clothespin. Dow apparently also believes in redundancy. The cup holder yields three spools of dental floss. She carries two pairs of sunglasses.

Styring started the car survey in Portland, Ore., not far from the farm she owns with her husband, then came here to Los Angeles. She also has hit Dallas, Atlanta and Freehold, N.J., and has stops scheduled for Detroit and Chicago. The trip is chronicled at www.inyourcarroadtrip.com.

And yes, after a speech to a marketing group later this year to reveal her key findings, she may write another book, this time about the little treasures that every car seems to carry.

Because, as any marketer will tell you, you are what you drive, and the stuff you take with you on the journey can reveal even more.

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