Spotify begins testing its first hardware: a car smart assistant

Spotify is about to begin publicly testing its first hardware: a voice-controlled smart assistant for cars, meant to help Spotify learn how people consume audio while they're driving. As part of the test, some Premium users will receive the device for free.

The device, called Car Thing, plugs into a vehicle's 12-volt outlet (aka a cigarette lighter) for power and connects to both a person's car and phone over Bluetooth. The device can be activated by saying, "Hey, Spotify," followed by a request for whatever the person wants to hear. It'll be linked to a user's Spotify account, so they can access their playlists.

Spotify says its goal isn't to become a hardware company
Car Thing includes a circular screen on one side, which will show what's being played. On the other side are a series of buttons that can be used to access playlist presets.

The test, which will be small and begin within the next few weeks, will only run in the US for now, and Spotify will reach out to people it's considering including. A source close to Spotify says the team doesn't have a hard timeline for how long the test will run, and that there are no intentions to launch this device as-is or to the public more broadly.

In a blog post, Spotify says that Car Thing was developed to "help us learn more about how people listen to music and podcasts." And despite this being a hardware device, Spotify says its focus "remains on becoming the world's number one

audio platform — not on creating hardware."

Still, the source says Spotify has trademarked not only the Car Thing name, but also the names Voice Thing and Home Thing, which suggests that Spotify might be interested in creating a home smart speaker or at least piloting a test program with one.

This source says Spotify is running its Car Thing test to learn more about the in-car experience. Spotify already has access to some data about its users' habits when driving — the team has an integration with Waze, as well as a driving mode, so presumably the app knows when someone is in the car and what they're consuming. However, if someone is playing music through an auxiliary cable, over Bluetooth, or via another third-party app, Spotify might not know the context for that listening session; Car Thing could change that.

We've seen hints of Car Thing over the past year or so. In January, *Financial Times* reported that Spotify was planning an in-car device that was activated through a "Hey, Spotify" command. But at the time, the paper said the device would cost around $100. My source says Car Thing has been in testing for a while, but that today marks the start of a test for a bigger group.

Spotify's clearly making a play to understand all facets of a user's day, which could help the team develop new products or even provide insight into what content to green light, especially as it relates to podcasts. This year, Spotify intends to spend up to $500 million on podcasting — the company has acquired multiple major podcast networks and is redesigning its app to make podcasts more accessible. The car is a natural place to promote that new content.

Every major tech company has been vying to own the car interface. In September, Amazon introduced the Echo Auto, a device that brings the Alexa smart assistant into a vehicle.

It’s currently available for $24.99 on an invite-only basis, but it’ll eventually retail for $49.99. Meanwhile, Google just announced a driving mode for its Google Assistant. Both Google and Apple also have software that can replace the interface of a car’s infotainment system.

While smart assistant companies want access to drivers’ in-car data, carmakers themselves are developing their own smart assistants and voice controls, too. But in a survey by JD Power, 76 percent of car owners said they’re interested in having the same brand voice assistant in their home and in their car. Spotify could face an uphill battle if it wants to convince its users to give up the assistant they’re already used to in order to play audio more seamlessly from their Spotify account.

Correction May 17th, 11:42AM ET: *Due to an editing error, this story initially said Spotify’s test would begin today. It will begin in the coming weeks.*

https://www.theverge.com/circuitbreaker/2019/5/17/18628772/spotify-car-thing-audio-experience-data-premium-assistant