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Geocentric CEO George Alexandropoulos demonstrates his company's first product, a device that unlocks a vehicle's doors using a five-digit code entered using the door handle.

Geocentric gets a handle on locked cars

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By **Jeff Miller**

George Alexandropoulos tossed his keys onto the passenger seat of his green PT Cruiser, got out of the car, pressed the automatic lock button and shut the door.

For most, a similar string of events would elicit an expletive and an embarrassed phone call to a spouse, the police or a locksmith.

Not for Alexandropoulos. He grinned from ear to ear.

"I'm confident," he said, as he pressed down on the button that opens the door. Six seconds later, the door beeped.

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"It's fired up now," he said. He pushed the door button once. A beep. Twice. A beep. Three times. A beep.

"The code is set to 1-2-3, but it's a five-digit code, so we'll have to wait for two zeros," Alexandropoulos said.

Two beeps later, the door unlocked. Alexandropoulos retrieved his keys.

"Cool, huh?" he said.

Alexandropoulos is able to open his locked car without his keys thanks to the first product from Geocentric Systems Inc., the Westford-based startup he founded.

It's not impressive to look at: a mechanism the size of a bar of soap with protruding wires. But once installed inside a car door and hooked into the electronic locking system, the product allows one to unlock the car with a five-digit code that's entered via the door handle.

"My goal is to get this device on every automobile that's rolling on the streets," Alexandropoulos said. "Getting locked out of your car is a big problem."

His hope is to sell the device directly to automakers, but he's starting out by going through aftermarket auto gadget installers such as Mobile Electronics Zone in Lawrence. Mobile Electronics general manager Warren Gallagher says he is enthusiastic.

"As of right now, we have two demo vehicles done," Gallagher said. "So far, everyone who I've showed it to, the first thing out of their mouth is 'I want one.' "

There's a similar product on the market called Taplock, Gallagher said, which is distributed by Oregon-based Global Trade Group Inc. Using optical technology, the device allows a car owner to tap in a code on the vehicle's windshield, according to the Taplock website.

"The problem is that there's a red light on the dash, so everyone knows you've got it installed," Gallagher said. "(Geocentric) is inside the door, so no one knows."

Ford Motor Co. has a keypad installed on many of its models that allows owners to unlock the door with a code.

Alexandropoulos argues his mechanism is superior — since it's installed inside the door itself, the mechanism is invisible. No parts to rust; no keys to get stuck.

But even if that's so, Geocentric will still have to face off against telematic solutions such as that offered by

Michigan-based OnStar Corp., a subsidiary of General Motors Corp.

OnStar initially allowed customers to get directions to a destination via telephone — operators on the other end knew the exact location of the caller's vehicle thanks to a global positioning device installed in the automobile.

General Motors installed the device on some of its high-end models and picked up the first year's subscription payment.

It was a nice feature to have, said Kevin Mixer, director of automotive and heavy truck industries research at AMR Research, a Boston-based technology and business research company.

"But they had a problem with renewal," Mixer said. "That's changed. Now they show how consumers can use it to better their lives."

One of the many features OnStar touts is its ability to remotely unlock a car door.

Mixer said, "They show a mother calling OnStar saying, 'My child is locked in the car; my 3-year-old daughter's in the back seat and the engine is running!' 'No problem,' OnStar says, and then they open the car door for her."

A system like Geocentric's does have a potential advantage in that there are no subscription fees to pay, Mixer said.

"The question, however, is, Has technology gone beyond it?" Mixer said. "Telematics is beginning to take more of a hold in the industry."

Alexandropoulos has previously raised friends and family money, but he's out looking for more.

"We're always looking for new capital, because we're looking at a potential large order of 100,000 pieces," he said.

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