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Less Means More When it Comes to Fear Appeals and Teenage Drivers

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Abstract

Existing road safety campaigns, while effective for many age groups, have failed to inoculate young drivers. The authors are seeking to address this anomaly by accessing recalcitrant drivers within the tertiary student population. The project has two main aims: first to investigate whether involvement in the creation of road safety messages can improve the attitudes and behavioural intentions of students involved in the study; and second, to identify creative solutions that might encourage prophylactic practices among novice drivers. This builds on a previous paper on teenagers' responses to road safety advertising and analyses a range of integrated campaigns produced by novice drivers during an action learning project. The results provide important policy insights, including alternatives to the current (and questionable) use of fear appeals to motivate behavioural change among young drivers.

Introduction

Risk taking behaviour is endemic within the adolescent population, be it unprotected sex that may lead to HIV/AIDS, drug taking or aberrant driving behaviours (Gray & Patterson, 1995, Lightfoot, 1997, Ponton, 1997). As road trauma is one of the most likely causes of death for adolescents (Stevenson, 2005), this paper focuses on antisocial driving behaviours in the early driving group, and how they might be countered with more effective communication strategies. From comparative statistical analyses a disturbing trend emerges: young drivers represent only 15% of the Australian driving population, but 27% of fatal road injuries, and 26% of hospitalisations involve drivers aged 17 to 25 (Stevenson, 2005). Similar figures hold for New Zealand, where 15-25 year old drivers were responsible for nearly 29% of the fatal and serious injury crashes in 2005 (New Zealand Ministry of Transport, 2007).

Analysis of road safety campaigns reveals a prevalence of fear-based creative concepts and graphic television commercials, and yet fear-based campaigns have been shown to be less effective on the early driving group than other driver population groups. The sense of impunity among novice drivers is so great it inoculates them against most fear-based advertising (Zuckerman, 2000). Australian Transport Accident Commission (TAC) figures show that in Victoria P-Plate drivers are four times more likely to be killed while driving than any other driving group (TAC, 2004). This paper argues that a better understanding of the target audience can provide insights into the best strategies to encourage safer driving.

Therefore, a case study was designed as an undergraduate group assessment task within two Australian universities. This allowed the researchers to gain access to at-risk drivers and seek their insights into the development of viable integrated marketing communication campaigns. The authors collaborated with their students to examine why novice drivers have proven impervious to most driver education campaigns, and to encourage students to develop creative solutions.

Fear based campaigns have long been a source of debate. Many authors contend that some anxiety is desirable but that a moderate level of fear is preferable to high levels of fear, which can cause the target to simply ignore the message (DeJong & Atkin, 1995; Job, 1988; McGuire, 1989; Witte & Allen, 2000). If that is so with adolescents, how else can we capture their interest, hold their attention and modify their behaviour? A logical starting point is to look at what campaigns have been embraced and which ones have had the desired effect. This paper analyses the results of phase two of an action research project carried out in two Australian universities. The results suggest there may be more effective alternatives to the current use of fear appeals to motivate behavioural change among young drivers.

The motivation for better targeted campaigns for novice drivers

In the last 25 years increasingly graphic advertising targeting road safety has cost the Australian economy \$6.6 billion (Horvath, 2004). These campaigns have included appeals designed to encourage people to wear seat belts and to avoid drinking and driving. For holders of a provisional licence this is clearly not working. The Pedestrian Council of Australia (PCA) reports that in NSW not one extra P-Plate driver's life has been saved over the last five years (PCA, 2004). This begs the question why road safety advertising is ineffectual on young drivers? Indeed the effectiveness of large-scale advertising campaigns is a contentious issue. Campaign architects and researchers (Advertising Federation of Australia, 1999) speak of success in terms of recall, or unaided recall or attitude, and the literature speaks in terms of driver intentions or retrospectively reported behaviour (Tay and Watson 2002: 60). But surely the only real measure that counts when dealing with road toll is behavioural change?

The role normally ascribed to advertising or marketing communication for road safety campaigns is to shock the target into better behaviour. Since 1989, the TAC creative strategy, which is multi award winning for both creativity and effectiveness, measured in terms of reduction in lives lost, has used the power of emotion, the threat of enforcement and education (Transport Accident Commission, 2004). This campaign has achieved success with most driver population groups showing improvement and a demonstrable behaviour shift. However it has not been without criticism; many feel the campaign relies too heavily on fear and should instead present alternative behaviours (Elder, *et al.*, 2004: 62). Could this lack of modelling of good behaviours provide a key to understanding why, in the face of great improvement for most drivers, novice drivers continue to die in such high numbers?

Statistically, novice driver deaths are becoming more significant. Stevenson (2005) draws on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) and the Roads and Traffic Authority (NSW) (RTA) to highlight the major correlating factors to death and serious injury in the early driving group. The most significant contributors were night driving and peer passengers. Internationally, these two issues have been targeted directly with great success resulting in reduction of serious injuries and deaths (Chen, *et al.* 2000, Ulmer, *et al.* 2000). According to the New Zealand Ministry of Transport, (2007) the most significant *driver* contributions to fatal crashes in 2003-5 were driving too fast for the conditions (42% of 15-24 year olds) and alcohol or drugs (31%).

Industry and consumer lobby groups in conjunction with state and federal governments are wrestling with how to reduce the death toll of young drivers. Legislating control mechanisms is one hotly debated solution in Australia. Restriction of peer passengers (The Chronicle, 2005:16), night-driving curfews, and engine capacity limits for P-platers are the most

contentious suggestions. Ostensibly, the challenge confronting social marketers is how to sell these unpalatable solutions. Even sound legislation, however, requires compliance. This demands that young drivers are persuaded that restrictions are reasonable and will be enforced. Government bodies are concerned that some measures would be seen as draconian and that the early driving group simply would not comply (NSW Govt. and RTA, 2004:12). Inarguably, more effective and persuasive communication with the target market is needed. Some way needs to be found to encourage young drivers to opt in and support a (perhaps voluntary) code of restrictions that may save their lives, or those of their friends.

Research Findings and Discussion

Epidemiological data show “P” Plater deaths are escalating at an alarmingly speed. We ask, “*Why have health promotion and advertising campaigns failed novice drivers?*” Our project sought to generate and analyse university students’ road safety campaign solutions. The findings reveal that key stakeholders – young drivers – offer creative solutions to this issue.

In 2004 students at the University of Canberra responding to a case study (see Appendix A) produced full commercial campaigns in one month to meet the marking criteria (see Appendix B), which were engaging, inspiring and creative. Their reflective journals hinted at a lingering awareness of road safety. In 2006 an additional cohort of first year pre-service health educators from the University of Wollongong were included. The results were very promising, with 12 complete campaigns developed by third-year University of Canberra students (five of which were ranked as High Distinctions – 85% or higher). The cohort from the University of Wollongong (first year pre-service health educators) produced 32 thirty-second television ads (and sets of campaign advice). Notably, only one idea (out of 44) drew on fear (the usual practice in government sponsored road safety campaigns). This was compulsory exercise with all students in each unit taking part. All students kept reflective journals, which gave insight to changes in the groups’ reported driving behaviours.

The vast majority of creative appeals fell into three broad categories:

- “One Life” – you only get one chance, no restarts, life is not a game and life sentence
- “Think Impact” your actions affect others for example family and friends left behind
- “Creative Visuals” use of “texting” for example R U OV?, SAFE:T1st, T-FACT, 1.12.06 and license plate or P-Plate visuals

Deeper analysis of the 12 comprehensive integrated communication campaigns produced by the University of Canberra cohort reveal some interesting trends in choices of target markets and media. All of the campaigns featured parents as a secondary or tertiary target audience and major influence on novice driver behaviour. “Pre-drivers” and younger children were a target audience for 75% of campaigns produced.

As might be expected, all campaigns featured 17–25 year old male drivers as a target audience (as novice driver deaths are dominantly male). One of the most frustrating aspects of trying to affect the behaviour of this mercurial group is choosing the right media channels. Our students, being members of the target audience, who are highly trained in health promotion and marketing communication have unique insights into the media habits and preferences of the novice driver group. They could use any media they felt appropriate, and were not restricted to “traditional” mass vehicles or ad formats. Some common themes

emerged. All campaigns utilised print media, specifically magazines. Further, many used the same titles; 83% selected FHM as a title, 75% selected Ralph, 58% Cosmopolitan and Cleo, 50% Wheels. All campaigns also used websites to connect with novice drivers and utilised links to other pages. Despite TV being a “mainstream” medium, 91% of campaigns utilised this as a major medium, with 67 % extending this through a viral transmission of television commercials via email or the Internet.

The importance of proximity of the message to the driving experience, in order to increase the chance of success, was a strong theme that emerged from the data. As a corollary, radio was a component of 83% of campaigns. It was noted that the target audience was usually exposed to radio whilst driving. This is interesting, given the prevalence of compact disc players in cars and MP3 players as alternative sources of music. In terms of the emerging buying pattern, Nova was the specific station chosen by 75% of campaigns, with use varying from saturation and “owning the space” tactics to morning buys of 9 am until noon.

To further capitalise on the driving experience, 50% of campaigns included generic “transit” advertising, with 67% of these specifically utilising ads on buses. Roadside billboards were heavily used by 75% of campaigns, and the humble sticker (some bumper, some traditional) was considered by 67% of project groups to be an effective means of accessing the target audience.

There were some surprises in the data, with only 41% of campaigns utilising cinema as a vehicle, and only 50% using T- shirts, 16% using key rings, and 25% using lanyards. Some of the more unusual media choices were a viral army of “high beam flashers” to trigger drivers to slow down, life sized cardboard “police people” with cardboard radars which are moved around various highway locations and glow in the dark nightclub stickers (activated by black light) showing contact details for taxis or other transport choices.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of the second phase of this research project suggest that fear appeals are unlikely to appeal to novice drivers. Instead, campaigns which present coping behaviours, which make teenagers think about the wider consequences of their actions, and which utilise parents as key influencers of teenage behaviour (and a secondary audience for any campaigns) are likely to be more effective. Campaigns should also integrate more traditional magazine and TV advertising with websites, transit and roadside messages, “drive time” radio, and stickers to improve the reach, synergy and effectiveness of communication channels. Campaigns should also begin by targeting pre-drivers to help them form positive attitudes before getting behind the wheel for the first time.

Feedback from academic reviewers suggested the study should be validated with additional student sectors / cohorts. We acknowledge a limitation of the study is using the captive audience of students who already drive. Funding from the ACT NRMA Road Safety Trust has made this possible. Phase three (in progress with results not available at the time of writing) will provide an opportunity to closely study and analyse the results across a more diverse student population in Australia and New Zealand. By doing this, we will move closer to systemising the process for wide spread use throughout university (novice driver) populations. Eventually we hope to help reduce death and serious injury in the early driving group in two ways: first, by positively influencing students’ driving behaviour through getting them actively involved in the creation of road safety campaigns (a previous paper reported the

first phase of this project, which showed involvement positively influenced students' attitudes and intended behaviours); second, by providing insights for policy makers on the most effective creative strategies and media channels.

For phase three, a case study will be prepared using data that outlines the theoretical understandings of road trauma in the novice-driving group. Students from five distinct university programs including Advertising and Marketing Communication, Adult and Community Education, Secondary School Health Educators, Tourism and Integrated Marketing Communication will then be set appropriate action learning tasks that focus on ways of preventing serious road accidents. The tertiary institutions will be located in NSW, the ACT and New Zealand. The use of a New Zealand cohort is apt as the country already has legislation that some Australian state governments still wrestle with, like night driving curfews and peer passenger limits for novice drivers.

In order to ascertain if any behavioural or attitudinal change occurs, pre-test data will be gathered before the action learning begins. This will include, attitudinal and behavioural data encompassing: thinking and behavioural styles, risk-taking and sensation-seeking behaviours and driving history. Electronic surveys will be administered via learning management systems available to students across all campuses involved.

Students will then work in small groups with guidance from the research-teaching team to complete a road safety assignment. Each week students will be required to make and submit reflective comments in a journal. The reflective journal contents will be "scaffolded" to focus students' on their awareness of road safety campaigns, and changes they might notice in their (or others) driving behaviours and/or attitudes.

Students will be required to present their campaign solutions to an audience of their peers and members of the research-teaching team. These presentations will be digitised (via video cameras, still cameras and digital sound recording devices) and stored on a central server, an external hard drive and burned to DVD. This will facilitate cost efficient, timely sharing of results, moderation and begin a cache of assignments to be used to inform further studies.

Post evaluation will take the form of a follow up survey and analysis of reflective journals seeking evidence of (reported) behavioural change. A question will also be incorporated into formal unit evaluations (two months after the end of the assignment) to check for lasting effects. The research team will compare and analyse student campaign outputs, reflective journal themes, and survey data for commonality and difference between cohorts. In particular we will seek evidence of creative campaign solutions that might affect behavioural change. To establish external validity of the suggested campaigns, the ads that students consider to be the most effective will then be tested on a hold-out sample at one of the participating universities. Attempts will be made to assess the impact that lack of involvement in the creation of the ads might have, to assess the likely influence that the campaigns might have on at-risk drivers "at large".

By engaging the target audience of youth road safety marketing campaigns, this collaborative project seeks to understand factors that may contribute to unhealthy driving behaviours in novice drivers and to explore the effectiveness of the education process for bringing about behaviour change. If successful in impacting upon unhealthy driving behaviours, this educational process has the potential to be adapted and delivered in a wide range of educational contexts (including defensive driving courses) for a minimal outlay but with the

potential for significant economic and social cost savings. The ultimate measure of success would be a reduction in (even one) serious injury or death in the novice driver population.

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APPENDIX A

The Case Study: Young, Fast and Dead!

Unquestionably something is sadly amiss on our roads. Everybody knows the group of drivers most at risk of an accident in a motor vehicle is young people (mostly males) aged between 18 and 25 years old. One third of all road accident fatalities are young people aged under 25. Young drivers, unlike any other driving group, have the combination of over confidence, a need for freedom and inexperience, a potentially fatal mix.

Too many parents are losing sons and daughters, young women losing boyfriends and young men losing mates. The social impact is phenomenal the effect it has on families, being ripped apart cannot be truly measured and is mostly underestimated. Increased spending on ever more graphic community service announcements (CSAs) attempting to curb the addiction to speed and power, escalating insurance premiums and increased time on both learner's permits and probationary licences just are not working. Something different needs to happen.

Members of the target group most at risk are in a unique position to offer some insight into this frustrating situation.

Some Radical Suggestions

International data show significant reductions in crashes, as a result of night driving curfews and peer passenger restrictions. The reduction ranges from 8 percent in New Zealand to 50 percent in Canada amongst the early driving group (RTA 2004). A recent study has shown that if a midnight to dawn curfew were in place for all P-plate drivers nationwide more than 100 lives could have been saved in the last three years alone. In fact the death toll from road traffic accidents of those aged under 21 could have been cut by 29 percent according to a Sydney study carried out by the George Institute for International Health at the University of Sydney. (Sunday Telegraph:2004)

Many groups including the NRMA, victims' families and road safety experts want P-plate drivers to be restricted in the number of passengers that they can carry, stating that distraction is a major factor in motor vehicle accidents in this age group. The chance of an accident is increased 15 fold when more than one passenger is carried. It is not just the "drunken hoon" at risk in this age group; even a conservative and conscientious young driver can be distracted by any number of activities in a car full of mates and lose concentration. If that happens to occur whilst turning a corner a little too fast, or on the verge of a road where surfaces change from bitumen to gravel the results can be catastrophic.

In other countries including New Zealand, Canada and some states of America graduated licences are in place, with much stricter controls and extra help when young drivers really need it in their first six months of driving on the road (Langley, 1996, Boase, 1998, Ulmer, 2000). These not only limit alcohol consumption and set speed limits as in NSW but also include night time curfews and strict passenger number limits. Road safety experts worldwide agree that these controls are working (Doherty, 1998, Chen 2000 & Williams, 2001).

In countries where these conditions exist there are exemptions for work, study, the transport of dependent children as required, and in some rural locations. Some say young people are

concerned about their restricted freedom, others say it seems a small price to pay compared to being dead.

Young people have said if such measures were introduced they would just not display their P-plates to save them from getting caught. Some argue for stricter penalties for such infringements. Recall when seatbelts and random breath testing were introduced they were considered major violations of personal liberty, but are now practices rarely questioned.

One would hope that the majority of P-plates would think about their own safety first and acknowledge that there will always be a small deviant minority of law-breakers, but this is no reason to delay the introduction of such life saving measures.

Surveys in the US indicate that parents feel their suspicions about the most dangerous driving behaviours - teenagers driving late at night with a car full of passengers (Doherty, Andrey, MacGregor 1998) – have been vindicated and the laws in place back their authority to forbid such behaviours.

So why hasn't anything been done about this? Road safety groups say the Government is valuing votes above young peoples' lives. Journalists assert that the federal and state Governments will not discuss the novice driver road toll openly in the media, as to do so is considered "too difficult when it comes to votes" (Sunday Telegraph :2004)

New restrictions are no substitute for effective driving training and that licences are handed out too easily to young people who are not trained to truly understand cars, road conditions and driving safely but rather to get a licence. Some young drivers have the opportunity to learn driver education at school for one year before even attempting a licence. This begins with understanding how cars work, then moving into driver simulators then eventually proceeding to cars in controlled conditions but learning assertiveness techniques, and accident prevention. But this opportunity is not available to all.

Many parents of victims argue that young drivers, particularly young males should not be allowed to drive turbo charged or V6 or V8 vehicles, or other excessively powerful vehicles.

The Ads Made Me do It

Johnston argued in 2004 that the motor vehicle industry voluntary code of practice (which states that acceleration should not be referred to either implicitly or explicitly to in the advertising of motor vehicles) is ineffective and calls for a compulsory code to restrict the content of advertising of motor vehicles. He notes that modern passenger sedans are the most powerful in history, have the highest horsepower in history, have the highest top speed capability in history, and have speedometers that are calibrated to 250 – 260 km/hr all of which send the message that speed is good (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). And he argues that one just has to watch car ads to see it is all about speed and power.

Monash University, in conjunction with Ford and TAC, are also testing The Intelligent Driver Control System, a satellite linked monitoring device that makes speeding physically impossible (Regan *et al* (2003). Is this a bit too much "big brother", or would it have the country's road toll greatly reduced? Paul Gibson of the NSW Stay Safe committee predicts this will become a standard feature in all cars within 15 years (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2004).

APPENDIX B

Integrated Communication Campaigns Total Strategy Mark Sheet

Names: _____

Tutorial: _____

Product/Service: _____

Excellent Good Fair Needs Work

The Situation Analysis:

including the problem definition/goals/
Did the solution come in on budget?

Creative Strategy:

Message Strategy:

Big Idea:

Continuity/Flow/Originality/Creativity:

Marketing Communications:

Rationale for choices/media strategy/timing etc
Were effective media solutions presented?
Was a media neutral option considered?

Other Marketing Activities:

Pre and Post testing of the plan:

**Total Campaign Coordination:
Impact/Continuity/ flow/ execution**

Comments on the Presentation:

Was PowerPoint used effectively?	
Was a hard copy of the slide show provided?	YES / NO
Reflective journals	YES / NO
Preparation:	
Delivery:	
Did it run to time?	YES / NO
Were minutes received?	YES / NO
Innovative Speaking Techniques:	
Handling of Questions:	
Group Co-ordination of the Talk:	

Overall how confident am I in the Marketing Communications Plan & the team? Would I hire this agency to perform this work? Do I think the plan would produce the necessary results?