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Young, Fast and Dead: A Fresh Perspective from the Early Driving Group

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Abstract

Risk taking behaviour is synonymous with adolescence. Moreover, epidemiological statistics associated with early driver deaths in Australia paint a disturbing picture. There is considerable debate about the effectiveness of advertising and marketing as a prophylactic to unsafe driving behaviours. This paper discusses the search for innovative approaches to road safety campaigns by accessing the perceptions of the novice driver group. A case scenario was developed by reviewing current literature on adolescent health behaviour, risk awareness, road safety and marketing communication. Initial findings from a pilot study with members of the early driving group, imply that they, as members of the target audience for road safety campaigns, do provide a fresh perspective on tone, content and style for campaign design.

Introduction

Risk taking behaviour is endemic within the adolescent population, be it HIV/AIDS, drug taking and aberrant driving behaviours (Gray and Patterson, 1995, Lightfoot, 1997, Ponton, 1997). As road trauma is amongst the most likely causes of death for adolescents (Stevenson, 2005), throughout this paper we will be focussing on anti social driving behaviours in the early driving group, and how they might be countered with more effective communication responses. From comparative statistical analyses a disturbing trend emerges: young drivers represent only 15 percent of the driving population, but 27 percent of fatal road injuries, and 26 percent of hospitalisations involve drivers aged 17 to 25 (Stevenson, 2005).

The importance of drawing on the complementary fields of marketing communication and public health education is that it marks a departure from the limited effectiveness of current practice. This concept paper describes a participatory research project to be carried out in two Australian tertiary educational institutions. The authors seek to collaborate with their students in order to address why novice drivers like themselves, have proven impervious to most driver education campaigns. Clearly, this study contributes to the body of literature by engaging directly with the target audience and seeking their constructive input to make public safety messages more effective. In place of traditional focus groups we have chosen to use action learning groups because the research seeks to generate new, more effective strategies rather than critique existing campaigns (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Theoretical context

Historically, marketing and advertising firms have entered the sphere of public health often working pro bono to address community issues. Results have been disappointing and the authors assert that this is linked to the ill-considered product-centric approach. Analysis of existing road safety campaigns has revealed 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 (Job, 1988).

The sense of impunity among novice drivers is so great it inoculates against most fear-based advertising (Zuckerman, 2000). 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 would provide a fresh perspective on the best strategies to influence driving behaviour in novice drivers.

The authors believe that insights provided by traditional marketing theory should not be directly applied to behaviour modification. This study is an extension of the evolution to marketing communication theory and acknowledges the consumer (the novice driver) as central to communication strategy, as opposed to product-centric theoretical models that commodify road safety.

In an attempt to improve on current practice, a case study was designed as an undergraduate group assessment task within two universities. This approach allows us to gain direct access to the target audience of driving safety campaigns and to seek their insight by asking them to develop viable integrated marketing communication campaigns.

Motivations for developing road safety based resources 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 those designed to encourage people to wear seat belts and not to drink and drive and so on. For holders of a provisional licence this is clearly not working. The Pedestrian Council of Australia (PCA) reports that in NSW not one P- Plate driver's life has been saved over the last five years (PCA, 2004). This begs the question what makes road safety advertising ineffectual on young drivers? Indeed the effectiveness of large-scale advertising campaigns is a contentious issue. Campaign architects and researchers (Sweeney, 2004: 221 as cited in AFA 1999) speak of their 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 single-mindedly used the power of emotion, the threat of enforcement, and an educational aspect (Thomas, 2004: 218). This campaign has achieved success with most driver population groups showing improvement and a demonstrable behaviour shift. However the TAC campaign has not been without criticism; many feel the campaign relies too heavily on fear and should instead present an alternative set of behaviours (Elder, *et al.*, 2004: 62). Could this observation, that modelling good behaviour is a crucial message component, provide a key to understanding why, in the face of great improvement for most drivers, novice driver deaths remain unchanged?

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 on our roads in the early driving group. The most significant contributors to serious injury and death on the roads were night driving and peer passengers. Internationally, these two issues have been targeted directly with great success resulting in reduction of serious injury and road deaths (Chen, *et al.* 2000, Ulmer, *et al.* 2000).

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. Restriction of peer passengers (The Chronicle, 2005:16), night-driving curfews, and engine capacity limits for P-plates are the most contentious suggestions. Ostensibly, the challenge confronting the profession is how to sell this unpalatable solution.

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 such 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 rather than different licensing restrictions. Some way needs to be found to encourage young drivers to opt in and support (perhaps a voluntary code of) restrictions such as these that may save their lives, or those of their friends.

This prompted the question: Are some groups impervious to fear-based behaviour modification? Fear based campaigns in general 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 and Atkin, 1995; Job, 1988; McGuire, 1989; Witte and Allen, 2000). If that is so with adolescents, how else can we capture their interest, hold their attention and infiltrate their behaviour? Perhaps a logical starting point is to look at what campaigns have been embraced and which ones have had the desired effect.

Research Method

This concept paper outlines an action learning study to be run concurrently at two Australian universities. The first cohort is third-year students studying the unit, "Integrated Communication Campaigns" (ICC), the third-year capstone unit of the Bachelor of Communication: Advertising and Marketing Communication at the University of Canberra. The other cohort will be first-year students studying the unit "Health and Health Behaviour" in the Bachelor of Education: Health and Physical Education at the University of Wollongong.

In order to elicit strategies directly from the target population, the designers of the study will provide students with as much autonomy as possible. Students will be given a case study (see Appendix A) as a group assignment and encouraged to create multi-dimensional strategies to heighten awareness of novice driver safety among their peers. This encapsulates the major issues in an accessible form, creating a format where strategies can be discussed in a participatory, direct manner. To mirror industry practice, students will be given one month to

produce complete integrated communication campaigns, including a full suite of creative executions such as public service announcements, proposed television segments, and so on.

The assumptions underpinning the case study are that night driving curfews and peer passenger limits are in place, and this unpalatable message has to be “sold” (teams will be given the option to not include these changes if their literature review can show support for their decision). Students will not be instructed to avoid fear-based campaigns merely to design messages that will work. The budget is set at \$10,000,000, and an Australian national campaign has to be ready for roll out two weeks prior to summer school holidays.

The sample will be asked initially to study existing government communication campaigns and to ascertain their persuasiveness, why particular strategies might or might not be effective with novice drivers, a target population of which they are a part. Since these campaigns have not been effective with groups like our subjects, seeing the materials through their eyes offers a fresh perspective. Many are holders of “provisional licences,” also known as “P – Plate” drivers, or “P-Platers,” the second stage in Australia’s graduated licensing system, which features such restrictions as a speed limit of 100km/h and a zero blood alcohol limit.

Qualitative methods are specifically designed and suited to studies that explore the meaning and nature of experience (Everall, 2000). Adopting a qualitative research approach affords this study a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world of the participant visible (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

This research was motivated, in part, by a desire to contribute to the body of knowledge about precursors to driving behaviour in 17 to 25 year olds. Although qualitative research does not provide the kind of statistical ‘facts’ that many find reassuring, (Allison and Pomeroy, 2000) point out that it may prove to be more useful and relevant to practitioners as it offers increased understanding.

This qualitative study also has beneficial pedagogical implications. By having the target audience actively analyse the problem and develop comprehensive marketing communication solutions, their level of emotional involvement in the assessment tasks increases. One would assume that even if the exercise produced no strategically sound or effective solutions, just the act of partaking would produce a lingering heightened awareness of the issues. A more concrete instrument to capture student learning, a reflective journal, is to be incorporated into the assignment, to better facilitate the analysis of resultant changes from participation.

Ethics advice has been sought to ensure that the participants’ identities can be concealed if desired. Participants will be made aware of relevant, available (free) counselling services, as some may find the analysis of graphic road safety campaigns distressing, or have close connections to deceased (former) members of the early driving group.

Advance Research Findings and Discussion

After a pilot with a small cohort of students at the University of Canberra in 2004 and the receipt of academic feedback, the authors decided that the project had merit and was potentially an important contribution to the study of youth health in Australia. We will expand the study to take in a broader sample, with better controls in place. Student campaigns produced in the pilot were assessed and moderated by a teaching team of five.

Four campaigns emerged worthy of comment due to the quality of their response against the marking criteria (Appendix B). A summary of these four creative responses follows:

“A Licence is a Life Time - Outlast your Licence” campaign, displayed superior research in pinpointing a target market, there were inconsistencies in their creative concepts, for example a license does not last a life time, inferior production levels, and real doubt that the big idea would be sustainable throughout a national campaign. Their primary media choice was gaming, this move independently mirrored a recent trend by agencies to actively involve the target market in developing interactive long ranging viral campaigns (Kiley, 2005).

“Don’t be a Dick” campaign used the juxtaposition of image style and colour was interesting and certainly attention grabbing however, it was inconsistent with their strategy which was not to show graphic scenes. In addition there was some question about suitable language usage with the central word being dick.

“ICU” campaign utilised an unexpected creative theme of shaming, however failed to produce successful television commercials, their concept of a black screen and voice over simply did not work, and they failed to comply with the time limits set for presentations of the creative.

“Real Life Real Limits” campaign was the stand out from the range of responses. Tonally, using humour and positive reinforcement were campaign highlights, the creative consistently demonstrated the benefits of compliance. All campaign executions were of the highest calibre, and judged to be effective and appropriate. This was an extremely well integrated campaign with a simple, clean graphic - homage to a P-plate. This was also the unanimous campaign winner in the eyes of the entire ICC unit, worthy of note considering the premise of the study was to gain insight from the target market.

The sample involved in the study produced some provocative and innovative findings most, not duplicating the trend towards fear based creative concepts currently in favour. This supports the hypothesis that the target audience might provide a fresh creative perspective. Anecdotally many students commented that they would drive more carefully in future and were glad not to be parents of novice drivers.

The authors have chosen to replicate the entire study to ascertain if a similar trend emerges with the 2006 cohorts. Pre-service Health and Physical Educators is a cohort to be added to this study. If similar trends emerge, the recommendation is to obtain access, to discuss these findings, at the creative stage of policy development with stakeholders and decision makers.

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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 and 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

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?