



# CREATING AN EFFECTIVE ROAD SAFETY CAMPAIGN

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## Why should organizations consider using a road safety campaign to make roads safer in their own community?

While there is national concern about a variety of road safety issues (e.g., speeding, distraction, pedestrians, drinking and driving), the level of concern regarding each of these problems may vary across individual communities. In addition, road safety problems are local, meaning that the specific characteristics of a problem are often unique in each community. For example, the distraction problem in one community may be mostly related to drivers checking their phone at busy urban intersections at a red-light; in another community distraction may mainly involve cyclists and pedestrians who are using headphones.

Road safety campaigns are flexible tools that communities can use to increase awareness and knowledge about specific road safety problems in their own community and can be adapted to a wide range of issues. Campaigns can be designed to target different audiences, are easily adapted to different media, and can be delivered for various lengths of time. They can also be delivered at local, regional, provincial or national levels. For these reasons, road safety campaigns have been used by jurisdictions around the world to reduce risky behaviours on the road and motivate positive changes in behaviour.

## What organizations can be engaged to assist in developing and delivering a road safety campaign?

There are a wide range of stakeholders in every community who have a vested interest in road safety. Key stakeholders that should be consulted and included in the development of a community road safety campaign may include:

- Local government
- Police agencies
- Public health and/or health care providers
- Business leaders
- Community/advocacy groups
- Automotive clubs
- Local media
- Youth organizations

While not every stakeholder may be able to participate, it is important that they are invited and, at a minimum, made aware of the initiative to develop a community road safety campaign.

For more information about engaging stakeholders, please review the *Stakeholder* fact sheet contained in the Toolkit.



## Why is it important to choose a theoretical model to strengthen my road safety campaign?

Road safety experts agree that the best road safety campaigns are based on psycho-social theories of behaviour, including behaviour change theories, theories of social persuasion, and fear-based campaigns. While these theories may use different terms and emphasize some aspects of behaviour as being more important than others, generally speaking, they are not fundamentally that different; neither are they mutually exclusive.

Generally these theories suggest that the factors that most influence behaviour (e.g., attitudes, intentions, social norms, perceived vulnerability, perceived barriers or consequences, or sources of social control) must be understood in order to change the problem behaviour. Hence, choosing a theoretical approach to guide campaign development can inform decision-making and ensure a coherent campaign strategy is developed, and increase the likelihood of behaviour change.

The first step to choose a theoretical model is to understand the road safety problems that exist in your community based on available police and health data. These data can help identify key factors in crashes (e.g., speed, distraction) and the most appropriate topics for a road safety campaign. Once a topic is selected, the next step involves talking to different segments of the community to understand the situational dynamic that contributes to the behaviour. For example:

- Drivers often speed because they are late and trying to make up time.
- Pedestrians cross mid-block instead of at intersections because it's more convenient.
- Cyclists disobey rules of the road because they do not believe they have to follow the same rules as cars.
- Drivers use electronic devices while driving because they believe they are better drivers and do not understand the risks.

It is important to understand the reasons why people engage in risky or problem behaviour on the road in order to develop messages that are most likely to motivate them to change their behaviour. It is equally important to understand that there are a variety of external and environmental factors that shape behaviour that must be considered. In addition to the attitudes of peers and social norms, people are also influenced by the presence of social controls and barriers to the behaviour. Collectively these factors will enable communities to adopt an approach that is well-suited to the problem and incorporate messages and delivery strategies that have the potential to positively influence behaviour change.

*For more information about theoretical models of road safety campaigns, please review the full report entitled "Road Safety Campaigns - What the Research Tells Us" contained in the Toolkit.*



## What approaches to campaign messages are most often used?

There are four main approaches to campaign messages that are most often used in social marketing campaigns (social marketing approaches aim to change the behaviour of a target audience). There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each style. Of importance, it should be underscored that some of these styles may be more appropriate for some audiences than others. Each of these approaches is briefly described below and campaign organizers should select the approach that is best suited to their community, topic and the situational dynamic underlying the problem behaviour.

- **Positive messages.** Research clearly shows that audiences in general respond better to positive and constructive messages. They respond less well to negative messages that convey critical, accusatory, or confrontational approaches to a problem. Drivers of all ages are generally unmoved by messages that are perceived as lectures that emphasize what not to do. "Don't" messages fail to suggest practical alternatives to replace unsafe behaviours. In other words, people know what they should NOT do, but not what they SHOULD do in lieu of the risky behaviour. Hence positive messages that provide the audience with an alternative to the behaviour that is easily adopted are powerful in influencing behaviour change.

Too often, messages the public receives about road safety (and societal issues in general) underscore negative consequences which can result in two typical reactions: 1) drivers become de-sensitized to messages; and, 2) drivers 'tune out' these messages and believe that they are somehow different from the drivers portrayed in the message (e.g., I'm a better driver than them), meaning that the message is perceived as irrelevant. In sharp contrast, drivers are more attracted to positive and constructive messages that illustrate how such situations can be managed or avoided entirely.

- **Humor.** The use of humor to deliver a key message is useful to engage the target audience and make them more receptive to the message and more open to suggestions that behaviour change is needed. In particular, people who engage in the problem behaviour are often defensive to messages that suggest their behaviour is wrong or problematic. These individuals are often less defensive about their own behaviour and more likely to respond messages use humor. Audiences are also often more receptive to humorous messages because it minimizes the 'lecturing tone' which audiences are more likely to ignore.
- **Fact-based messages.** These types of messages rely upon research evidence and are designed to educate an audience about risks and consequences in a constructive way, and to encourage them to make informed decisions about their behaviour. The presentation of facts based upon hard data makes it more difficult for people to dismiss or minimize risks and can help to correct misperceptions as well as focus discussion away from personal opinions. In addition, a presentation of the facts can also stimulate interest among the target audience and motivate them to get the facts or to be better informed about issues and understand the risks.



- **Fear-based appeals.** This approach to road safety campaigns confronts people with visual images or associations of negative consequences of risky behaviours by capitalizing on their fears (SWOV 2009). This approach takes advantage of the emotions of a target audience that are provoked with graphic imagery (e.g., crash footage, blood, injuries) to scare and shock individuals, or that use messages that attempt to invoke shame or guilt. The effectiveness of such approaches is unclear. Research shows that people react differently to fear-based campaigns depending on their characteristics, as well as how the fear appeals are used. A review of road safety campaign materials in Australia determined that positive emotional appeals (e.g., those using humor) may be more persuasive for young males than fear appeals, whereas the opposite was found to be true for females (Wundersitz et al. 2010). As well, fear-based approaches have been shown to be less effective on individuals who do not feel vulnerable or susceptible to the issue in the first place (Cismaru et al. 2009). This has implications for the estimated effectiveness of campaigns where the target audience does not feel the need to change, or believes the issue is not relevant to their own behaviour.

## What are the most important steps associated with creating a road safety campaign?

A well-designed campaign is based upon three important steps:

- The first step is to analyze local crash data (often available from police agencies) to quantify the extent of the road safety problem and its characteristics. These data are essential to ensure that there is a need to address the road safety issue and that the campaign can be appropriately targeted to the relevant audience. For example, local data may show that distracted driving is in fact a significant contributor to road crashes in the community, and both male and female drivers aged 25 to 45 often engage in this behaviour. This would suggest that a distracted driving campaign targeted towards this audience would be an appropriate strategy for this community.
- The second step is to understand why people are engaging in the behaviour. Discussing the issue with different community partners to gain insight into the issue is a good strategy to gather this information. For example, the behaviour may be a result of misinformation or misperceptions about the problem, local attitudes towards the behaviour in terms of its acceptability, misunderstanding of the risks, or because the problem behaviour is easier and more attractive than safer alternatives. There are also a variety of external and environmental factors that shape behaviour. In addition to the attitudes of peer groups and social norms, people are also influenced by the presence of social controls and barriers to the behaviour such as the presence of enforcement.

Research has demonstrated that people's inability to accept a message as necessary or relevant to their own behaviour stems from four factors:

- » low perceived susceptibility to the negative consequences of the behaviour;
- » a failure to believe in the seriousness of the problem;
- » a lack of perceived risk; and,



- » the belief that behaviour change costs more than the benefits of performing the behaviour (Gotthoffer 2001).

Campaigns should seek to address these barriers to ensure messages are relevant to the audience.

It is also easier to change behaviour when messages are delivered in close proximity to it. This means that a core objective should be to reach drivers when they are in their vehicle, and the use of enforcement strategies to augment the delivery of campaigns if practical and feasible, can strengthen barriers to the behaviour and increase controls to help prevent it. Recognizing why people engage in the behaviour is necessary in order to identify what types of messages can best influence it (e.g., fact-based, fear-based, persuasive, social norming).

- The third step involves the messaging and design of a campaign. The tone and content of the message as well as its visual presentation and imagery must resonate with the personal experiences of road users whose behaviour is targeted. These messages should be compelling or persuasive, interesting, attractive, evoke an emotional response, and suggest alternative behaviours that are easy to adopt to help ensure that drivers are not only aware of messages, but likely to accept them.

*For more information about branding and messaging in relation to campaign design, please review the [Branding](#) and [Messaging](#) fact sheet contained in the Toolkit.*

## **How can communities promote and disseminate their road safety campaign?**

Dissemination strategies should be developed with consideration of what types of communication tools are most often used in your community, and also what types of tools the different stakeholders involved in the campaign use themselves. For example, local businesses may promote their products and services in local newspapers and use flyers. Community organizations may use posters, and local government may produce brochures and share information about services online. There are also a range of campaign materials that can be distributed such as t-shirts, key chains, bumper stickers and so forth. It is important to review what types of materials are familiar to the target audience in your community. The best way to disseminate your community road safety campaign is to use communication strategies that are familiar to the target audience and that already exist. Discussion with stakeholders to better understand how they currently promote their own organizations and services can provide good insight into what strategies may work best in the community.

Well-executed campaigns are those that carefully consider the use of various campaign tools and strategically select those that are most accessible, practical, and likely to reach the target audience, particularly if budgets are limited. While there is often a desire to utilize a broad spectrum of tools in diverse locations to maximize reach and penetration, and cost is always a factor, the guiding strategy should not lose sight of the characteristics of the target audience and where the behaviour is most likely to occur. Hence it may be more feasible and efficient to deliver posters in places of business frequented by the target population, to place billboards



on the roads where they are likely to drive or at high crash locations, or to utilize radio public service announcements during peak driving periods when the behaviour is likely to occur. Similarly, if the target audience spends less time watching TV or online, these may not be the most efficient strategies to reach them, and they are unlikely to be engaged in the problem behaviour during these moments.

### **When is the best time to reach the target audience with road safety campaign messages?**

Messages that are delivered in close proximity to the behaviour are most effective in changing it. This means that a core objective should be to reach drivers when they are in their vehicle, and the use of enforcement strategies to augment the delivery of campaigns if practical and feasible, can strengthen barriers to the behaviour and increase controls to help prevent it.

### **How long should a road safety campaign be delivered?**

The duration of the campaign is linked to its effectiveness. Positive outcomes can be achieved with campaigns that are delivered for fairly short periods of just one month and it is not necessary to sustain such campaigns over a longer period if it is neither practical nor feasible to do so. However, it is also possible to utilize a campaign over a much longer period of a few years by intermittently refreshing it with new messages, but using the same theme and topic to reinforce behaviour change on a larger scale. This can help to keep the issue 'top of mind' without expending significant resources, and serves the larger purpose of re-shaping attitudes and social norms related to an issue.

To illustrate, repeated and continuous messaging conveying that drinking and driving is risky and has serious consequences has produced widespread consensus that drinking and driving is unacceptable. Similarly, campaigns underscoring the importance of wearing a seatbelt has resulted in some 93% of Canadians wearing their seatbelt in a vehicle. Neither of these changes happened quickly or in a short time frame, but instead were achieved over a much longer period, resulting in widespread social change.

### **Why should communities evaluate their own road safety campaigns?**

The knowledge and learning that is available about the effectiveness of road safety campaigns is only available because jurisdictions chose to pursue the evaluation of their respective campaigns. While important lessons have been learned from previous campaign evaluations, there is still a considerable need to develop and adopt better and more rigorous approaches to evaluations. In particular, evaluations based upon observational or crash report data could provide greater insight into the impact campaigns have on overall road safety and behaviours. As such, communities should also not overlook the importance of evaluation in relation to their own campaigns, and incorporate this into the planning process.

*For more information about campaign evaluation, please review the [Evaluation](#) fact sheet contained in the Toolkit.*



**Notes**

**This document is part of the Community-Based Toolkit for Road Safety Campaigns.**

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