

What do people think of road safety advertising campaigns?

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Abstract

Audience reaction to New Zealand's drink-driving, speed drugged-driving and fatigue advertising messages is monitored through a continuous survey of audiences' reactions to the advertising messages. The paper discusses some of the changes which have been measured in people's perceptions and attitudes from campaigns targeting speeding, drink-driving, fatigue and drugged driving. In addition, the surveys provide a monitor of public interest and concerns with the significant road safety issues of the day.

Background

Critical to New Zealand's road safety advertising programme is the continuous monitoring of audience reactions to the advertising messages. A weekly survey since 1997 provides information about the advertisements themselves, such as relevance, takeout, level of conversation, and likelihood to change attitudes. Perceptions and attitudes about road safety issues are included in the survey, using a stratified sample to provide sufficient data for youth, rural and Maori audiences. The findings are used on a weekly, monthly, quarterly and annual basis, but have rarely been used outside the advertising programme.

The survey programme allows the advertising campaigns to adapt and react rapidly to changes in public attitudes and behaviours, with new material, new media strategies or new target audiences. Although designed to support advertising, the information collected can be used more widely to inform road safety strategies and policies. This paper discusses the use of the survey in three of New Zealand's campaigns.

Campaign tracking

Over the years, the drink-driving campaign has seen substantial success among rural and young drivers. The advertising component is designed to support enforcement and to encourage lower levels of drinking if driving. Between 1998 and 2003, survey respondents' perceived likelihood of encountering a Police checkpoint increased steadily from 20% to 35%, with pronounced seasonal increases each December. Advertising messages subsequently promoted the social unacceptability of drink-driving, giving a small decrease in the perception of enforcement to 30% by 2007, but an increased perception that four or five drinks was a road safety problem. In 2014 the driver alcohol limit was lowered to 50 mg/100ml. The campaign now targets young males through influencers he might listen to, such as his close mates, his family and his colleagues, friends, teammates and even local bystanders. Those in the survey who say they would drive after more than two drinks have since decreased from 9% to 6%.

Speeding has proved a difficult behaviour to shift. While the advertising continues to support the efforts of Police, it has had a subtle change of emphasis in recent years, to bring the principles of a safe system into the public arena. In particular, people's vulnerability and fallibility have featured heavily in recent advertising messages. Behaviour changes are measured through regular surveys of vehicle speeds. Attitudinal changes are also monitored from levels of support for the enforcement programme, perceptions of others' speeds, attitudes towards speed, and beliefs about the relationship with injury and the likelihood of being ticketed. Respondents who believe they will be likely to be ticketed at speeds over 110km/h has increased from 63% to 72%.

The fatigue campaign has in some ways had the most difficult task, without an enforcement aspect to be reinforced by advertising, and no straightforward behaviour measure to show safety gains. The advertising tracking survey instead monitors a set of self-reported behaviours, which are typically slow to change; only one (the percentage of respondents who say they would get a good night's sleep before driving long distances) has shown a significant improvement from 70% to 82% in the past 8 years.

In addition, the surveys have provided a monitor of public interest and concerns with the significant road safety issues of the day. These perceptions can change in response to high profile incidents, bursts of media interest in particular issues, as well as the advertising campaigns themselves. The regular topics (alcohol, speed, road conditions and mobile phones) are always highlighted, but some important issues (such as fatigue) remain low on the list.