

Distracted Driving

Most Americans agree that distracted driving is an enormous problem. A 2009 survey by CBS News found that 97% of respondents thought that texting while driving should be illegal. In many states it already is. Despite this, distracted driving rates remain alarmingly high. What, then, can be done about this rampant issue that so many people have already tried to fix? I shall humbly attempt to answer this question in my brief essay.

In 1992, seatbelt usage was mandatory in most of the United States, yet according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration only 62% of roadway users wore seatbelts. The primary factor in that number's eventual rise to almost 90% was the wildly successful Click it or Ticket campaign.

Before Click it or Ticket, most of the push for seatbelt usage focused on the dangers posed by failure to buckle up. The brilliance of Click it or Ticket was that it put the focus not on memento mori but on something a little more tangible: money. A generation of people that shout "yolo" at those who would remind them of their own mortality can be surprisingly cautious in the face of tangible consequences. Now, traffic fines are significantly less relevant to the primary perpetrators of distracted driving, those under twenty according to the NHTSA, than they are to the adults who were the target of Click it or Ticket. The distracted driving problem has an advantage over the seatbelt use problem in that distracted driving puts many people and people's property

at risk, whereas seatbelts preserve only their user's life. Therefore, there is a much wider variety of tangible consequences to market.

Now, the campaign I propose has marked differences from Click it or Ticket, but fundamentally it is quite similar. One of Click it or Ticket's most effective tools, if not the most effective, was the phrase "Click it or Ticket" itself, which deftly employed an old memory technique to get the message out. Repeat the phrase over and over again relentlessly in commercials, documentaries, and public service announcements and get celebrities and news anchors to say it and the phrase will be stored in the human memory in the same place the accompanying information is stored. The result is that the simple repetition of the phrase brings a wealth of information associated with it to the forefront of the memory. This way, if the barrage of information on why a person should buckle up is not enough to remind him to do so when he gets in the car, it takes four words on a road sign to send all that information to his brain all over again and he is effectively reminded. If he doesn't buckle up at that point there is no hope for him. A campaign formatted thusly could be very effective at getting people to put their cell phones down. The phrase I shall use here to demonstrate is, "Be a Hero, Pay Attention."

Imagine a billboard that features a photograph of a thoroughly wrecked blue car, over which in orange words it reads,

DON'T TEXT AND DRIVE

It's not likely to convince anyone to do more than sigh and think "I probably shouldn't be doing this," is it? The wrecked car, though graphic, is not in itself convincing. On top of that, anyone who has ever been a lifeguard or a teacher knows that they can't give children a negative instruction such as "don't run," because all the child hears is "run." Instead they say "walk," or "stop," depending on the circumstance. This is a simplistic concept, but in a billboard that a driver will give less than a second of attention to, simplistic concepts are necessary to get the point across. Despite these flaws in design, the "don't text and drive" billboard stands on the highway by my house and hopes to be effective.

Now picture this billboard. The photo is of a smiling little girl beside red letters that read,

CHILDREN DIE

when you text and drive

BE A HERO - PAY ATTENTION

Better, isn't it? That one makes you set your phone down.

The phrase "Be a Hero - Pay Attention," gives a positive, definite action, "pay attention," and an emotional reason, "be a hero." On top of that, if my proposed campaign takes effect, the phrase is already connected to a truckload of other information on exactly what you should do and why you ought to do it in the mind. Of course that phrase may not be the best one possible, this is simply a working example.

Some existing measures to reduce distracted driving include Driver's Ed courses, campaigns at individual high schools, isolated TV commercials and documentaries, defensive driving courses, and the occasional billboard or flashing orange highway sign. They have been effective, but their effectiveness could be magnified if they were working in tandem with one another. A group of people dedicated to this cause with funding and support could:

1. Connect the existing efforts to raise awareness with a unified theme and slogan
2. Reinforce the existing programs with funding
3. Commission Public Service Announcements, Television commercials, and billboards nationwide

In my humble opinion, a nationwide campaign focused around a single, effective phrase and targeted towards teenagers and young adults on the roadway is the most effective way to combat distracted driving. A graphic video detailing the dangers of texting and driving, though it may be very well formatted and masterfully directed, is likely to be forgotten in a month. However, coupled with a short phrase such as this one, five words on a billboard would serve to remind drivers of the video and the information therein. So many people have already been informed of the dangers of distracted driving, all that's left seems to be to get them to actually put the phone down. A simple campaign like this one that could be displayed on flashing highway signs as effectively as it could be in hour-long TV spots is, I believe, exactly what is needed.