Public Information Programs Related to Alcohol, Drugs, and Traffic Safety

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In many countries, attempts to reduce highway crashes involving alcohol or other drugs include public information campaigns as well as various measures designed to control the distribution or sale of mind-altering substances. In a sense, most of these campaigns can be regarded as efforts to remedy the failure of other control measures, since the usual target is the consumer who is assumed to be in a position to choose whether to drive while in an impaired condition. A great many drivers decide to do so, usually without harm to themselves or others — a fact they have learned which makes it extremely difficult to convince them that they are at greater risk than drivers whose perceptual and motor skills are unimpaired. Given this double burden, it is not surprising that campaigns aimed directly at the drinking driver have not been very successful.

In the last few years, a number of campaigns have moved beyond attempts to inform or persuade this particular target audience and have focused on what might be termed informal influence agents — friends, party hosts, and family members. Such people are often able to control a person's access to alcohol or drugs, or to a car, or both. In contrast to law enforcement personnel, they are able to exert influence before a violation or accident occurs, and they are not viewed as agents of a legal system with the power to punish. The use of this indirect approach is an encouraging development, in part because it is potentially capable of recruiting large numbers of people personally concerned about the impaired-driver problem and available at the times and places where positive action can be taken to reduce it.

Several other target audiences for public information programs have been identified in addition to those noted above. Many programs are designed for the general public, usually to increase awareness of the problem or to solicit support for control measures; some deal exclusively with young people; others are aimed at minority groups, employers, doctors and lawyers; and a relatively small number are designed to reach legislators, opinion leaders, the press, and educators.

THEMES

The themes or appeals to be considered below have been used in campaigns directed to one or another of these target audiences, although it will be obvious that most of them

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are appropriate only in campaigns intended for the potential offender. Threat of loss: life, friend or loved one, attractiveness (disfigurement), financial costs, respect of others, driver’s license, freedom (jail, etc.), employment.

Personal responsibility, maturity.

Responsibility to others (as parent, friend, host).

Value of knowing personal limits.

Separation of drinking from driving.

Need for public support of control measures: enforcement, detection, treatment, punishment.

Legal limits vs. "safe" limits.

Factors influencing relationship between alcohol consumption and blood alcohol concentration (BAC) such as weight, rate of drinking.

Number of drinks producing various levels of BAC.

Relationship between BAC and risk of crash involvement.

Driving-related factors impaired by alcohol or drugs: vision, reflexes, judgment.

Only the last four of these themes are "informational" in a strict sense; the others utilize some form of threat, invoke normative values, or appeal to concern for the common good.

INTENDED RESULTS

Although the ultimate objective of campaigns in this field is a reduction of injuries or fatalities on the highway, most campaigns focus on one or more intermediate objectives which are assumed to be related to this outcome. Appropriate changes in beliefs or attitudes, for example, are assumed to lead to desired changes in behavior, which in turn are expected to produce a lower incidence of violations and crashes. In the same way, institutional or organizational changes in a desired direction are presumed to reflect the influence of public information programs and establish an improved climate for reduction of the problem. Setting specific objectives for campaigns is obviously a critical step in the process of evaluating their effects, since the inappropriate use of second or third order objectives will almost guarantee that any program will appear to be a failure.

Programs dealing with drug abuse have been used widely in recent years, but very few of these have dealt specifically with traffic safety. Thus the examples of intended results given below have been taken from campaigns on drinking and driving rather than from those concerned with drugs. In most cases, the desired outcomes were inferred from campaign materials.

Knowledge or Belief

It was hoped to bring about an increased awareness of:

Magnitude of drinking-driver problem.

BAC limits (legal vs. illegal, impaired vs driving under the influence (DUI)).
Number of drinks producing various levels of BAC.
Relationship between BAC and risk of crash involvement.
Factors affecting intake-BAC relationship.
Myths about methods of sobering up.
Existing countermeasures programs.
Laws regarding tests, penalties, etc.
Methods of detecting, prosecuting, and treating drunk drivers.
Treatment methods and their effectiveness.
Risk of encountering a drunk driver.
Personal drinking limits.
Nature of organization sponsoring campaign.

**Attitude**
The material was designed to produce acceptance of, or favorable attitude toward:
Various control measures (screening devices, pre-arrest breathtesting, special patrols, videotaping, license suspension or revocation, treatment programs, etc.).
Use of public funds for control measures.
Legal BAC limits.
Limiting use of alcohol by self or others.
Organization sponsoring campaign.

**Behavior of Individuals**
The behavior changes desired were:
Altered alcohol consumption (frequency, amount, location).
Decreased driving after drinking.
Increased efforts to discourage others from driving after drinking.
Writing letters to editors, public officials, etc.
Contributing time or money to relevant voluntary groups.
Requesting further information about drinking and driving.

**Responses of Organizations and Institutions**
These covered:
Inclusion of alcohol/safety information in school curricula.
News media coverage of relevant items (frequency, placement, treatment, size).
Editorials on alcohol/safety (frequency, treatment, etc.).
Referrals to alcoholism agencies from other agencies (including police).
Ratio of arrests to convictions on drinking-driving/charges.
Reductions of DUI to impaired.
Endorsements of programs for detection and control.
Funding of control programs.
Hospitals’ admission of alcoholics for treatment.
Operation of employee alcohol programs by local industry.

EXAMPLES OF CAMPAIGN MATERIALS

Some of the themes and intended results listed above can be illustrated by the following group of television spot announcements, chosen from the collection of the Public Communication Group at the University of Michigan’s Highway Safety Research Institute.

1. One spot, prepared for the Denver Alcohol Safety Action Project (ASAP), uses humor and animation to show that drivers who have been drinking have an unrealistically low perception of risk. The message is intended for people who may drink before driving but who retain the ability to restrict their intake i.e., social drinkers rather than problem drinkers. The use of a cartoon technique may serve to make the message less threatening and thus arouse fewer defensive reactions among viewers.

2. “Ending the Party,” produced for the Columbia ASAP, offers several specific suggestions as to means by which risks can be reduced for people who have been drinking at a party. The message need not be restricted to that context, of course, and its “how to do it”/information probably makes it useful to people who have already accepted the basic premise.

3. A recent spot from the U.S. Department of Transportation, “Poker” represents an effort to elicit concern on the part of people who know someone who drives after drinking too much. It does not offer explicit recommendations for action but may legitimize attempts by friends to protect a problem drinker from himself.

4. Dana Andrews, a well-known actor, adds authenticity to his comment about the number of problem drinkers on the road by stating that he is an alcoholic (Figure 1). This U.S. Department of Transportation spot is aimed at the general public and is apparently designed to increase awareness of the seriousness of the problem and the need for constructive control measures.

It's 5:00 in the afternoon on the Santa Monica freeway . . .
and one out of every fifty drivers is drunk—at 5:00 in the afternoon.
Does that surprise you? It doesn’t surprise me at all. I’m Dana Andrews and I’m an alcoholic.

I don’t drink anymore, but I used to and I know that most drunk drivers aren’t coming home after a night on the town and a couple of drinks.

They’re heavy, serious, problem drinkers. They’re sick and we have to help them . . .

because they can’t always help themselves.

Get the problem drinker off the road—for his sake and yours.

But they’re killing people and we have to stop them—because they can’t stop themselves.

5. The use of a professional stunt driver in one spot produced for the National Safety Council demonstrates that even an expert driver cannot handle a car well after drinking. The message undermines the common rationalization by many persons who drink and drive that their driving ability is above average.
6. Another common rationalization is attacked in the spot by the Charlotte ASAP (Figure 2). Many individuals feel that if they drink only beer they are unlikely to get drunk, and thus would not be subject to greater risk behind the wheel.

Here's something for that friend who thinks beer is safer than the hard stuff.

Say we could take a full shot of whiskey—86 proof—and squeeze out the pure alcohol.

Then say we could squeeze out the alcohol in a 16-ounce beer.

Here is the real hard stuff and the amount is the same.

One beer, one shot. That's something for your friend to think about.

But if he's had one too many to think clearly, think for him—

Let's keep our friends alive

and don't let him drive.
7. The use of special police patrols gives substance to another spot from the Charlotte ASAP regarding the increased risk of being picked up for drunk driving. This type of message is probably more effective with social drinkers than with problem drinkers, but the general point may be validly and effectively made with the former group. The theme line “Let’s keep our friends alive” suggests that non-drinkers as well would be an appropriate target audience for this message.

8. If reducing crashes is a direct objective of a campaign, convincing the general public not to drive at a high-risk time of day may be at least as effective as aiming the same message at the relatively small number of persons who cause a disproportionate share of accidents. The Charlotte ASAP has done this in a TV spot which seems particularly appropriate for people who are more likely to be the victims than the causes of late-hour crashes.

9. An Oregon ASAP spot offers people a rationale for supporting a control effort through emphasizing the reality and seriousness of the problem. The use of a “talking head” approach rather than conveying the same information through a voice-over narration gives the film a somewhat static appearance, but using the site of a well-publicized crash tends to reinforce the basic message and does add some movement to the background.

10. An animation film, also from the Oregon ASAP, attempts to undermine in a humorous way some of the more common misconceptions about ways of sobering up after drinking. The target audience apparently includes both social and problem drinkers, though the spot would be unlikely to have any effect on the latter group.

11. “Good Old Harry” (Figure 3) caricatures the type of party host who feels that a seeming generosity is a greater value than moderation or responsibility to one’s guests.

12. A fund-raising spot from the National Council on Alcoholism represents an attempt to generate a more sympathetic attitude toward alcoholics. It also illustrates the kind of campaign material related to alcohol but not to safety which contributes to the total pattern of impressions people receive through competitive public service advertising.

13. One spot from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety plays on the widely-used “know your limits” campaigns by ridiculing those who misinterpret or misuse the slogan. Whether this approach reinforces or undermines the effectiveness of campaigns which use the appeal in a straightforward way remains an open question.

14. Another spot from the AAA Foundation again takes a standard appeal (“coffee for the road,” etc.) and by extending its attempts to counteract the belief that coffee can overcome the effects of alcohol. The target audience for this type of message may be social drinkers.

15. A National Safety Council spot which has received very wide circulation on American television is shown in Figure 4 but it has not produced a large write-in response to the specific appeal stated at the end. It is aimed at the general public and attempts to arouse concern about the magnitude and consequences of the drinking-driver problem.
A drink in your hands puts a smile on your lips, that's Harry's motto. And he'll get you to smile if it takes him all night.

How come when you wake up tomorrow your head will pound and you'll feel rotten all day long? How come?

There are nine million problem drinkers in this country—and most of them have a friend like Harry.

Meet good old Harry. The best host on the block.

There's just one thing though. If Harry's such a good host, how come he makes you feel so bad?

Because Harry's a pusher—the neighborhood pusher.

Good old Harry. With a friend like him, who needs enemies?

Everybody has a good time at Harry's parties. Everybody. And nobody ever goes away sober, either.
It's not the drink that kills on our highways . . . it's the drunk . . . the problem drinker . . .

Look at all he's done for us . . .

helped to eliminate the overcrowding in our schools . . .
brought families together . . .

After all he's done for us, shouldn't we do something for him?

If he's sick, let's help him. But first let's get him off the road.

Do something. Write the National Safety Council . . .

and your voice will be heard.
Perhaps occasionally you drink and drive—just those three or four drinks, enough to make you legally impaired.

If you are suspect, you will be asked to submit to a mandatory breathalyzer test:

Impaired driving is a criminal charge, and that's just how you will be treated.

That's the way it is. Think about it next time you decide to save a few dollars on a cab.

And for some reason you are stopped. Police officers are well trained at spotting drinking drivers.

A 0.08 reading will result in your being charged.

The police report and your breathalyzer reading will normally result in conviction.

This message was brought to you as a public service by this station and your safety councils.
Your reaction time is all off, as if you had weights on your feet.

Your eyesight is now distorted, like looking through greased glasses.

Your side vision is cut down by as much as 80%.

How would you like to try driving your car like this some night? A lot of people do.

This is the way it is after you've had a few drinks then try to drive.

Life will go on without you.

PUBLIC SERVICE OF THIS STATION AND THE KENTUCKY ASSOCIATION OF INSURANCE AGENTS

Shouldn't you think twice before trying to drive before drinking?

You bet your sweet life you should!
Have you ever thought . . . about what it would be like . . .
to lose your license?

Don’t drink and drive!

Figure 7
16. Rather than assuming that alcohol and driving can be effectively separated by most people, a Canada Safety Council spot (Figure 5) is based on the fact that result from excessive drinking (Figure 6). It can be assumed to be directed to anyone this spot illustrated in Figure 7: the loss of your driver’s license could produce some unhappy consequences.

17. One spot, prepared for the Kentucky Association of Insurance Agents, is unusual in that it attempts to dramatize the specific kinds of ability impairment which result from excessive drinking (Figure 6). It can be assumed to be directed to anyone who drives after drinking, and offers a means of increasing people’s awareness of a condition which is normally very difficult to perceive accurately.

18. The Highway Safety Division of Virginia has a single and explicit message in this spot illustrated in Figure 7: the loss of your driver’s license could produce some unhappy consequences.

CONCLUSION

Most campaigns on drinking and driving have not been evaluated in any systematic way, and as result it is not possible to provide definitive conclusions regarding the relative effectiveness of the appeals illustrated in these campaigns. Appropriate evaluations of actual effects in the field are obviously needed to furnish an answer to this and other questions.