Reduction in Drink Driving in Victoria

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ABSTRACT

The Transport Accident Commission (TAC) is Victoria’s sole third party insurer and was handed responsibility for road safety in Victoria in late 1989. Since that time, Victoria’s road toll has been almost halved, with a marked decrease in the incidence of drink/driving. A key element in the TAC’s financial strategy is its accident prevention program, aimed at not only saving lives, but also dollars. Expenditure in the drink/drive area has been carefully targeted on the basis of four major strategic components: Evaluation & Research; Engineering; Education; and Enforcement.

TAC, in conjunction with Police, has been quick to respond to emerging trends in accident and enforcement data, and both bodies are generally recognised as being the architects of Victoria’s successful road safety strategy.

In 1989, 113 drivers or riders killed on Victorian roads had a blood alcohol content above .05%. By 1993 this number was down to 63. The number of drivers testing over the legal limit also decreased markedly between 1989 and 1994: down from one in 255 in late 1989 to one in every 668 tested in August this year.

THE TRANSPORT ACCIDENT COMMISSION (TAC)

Victoria’s Transport Accident Commission (TAC) was established in 1987 and has grown into one of the largest insurance organisations in Australia.

The TAC’s core business is providing transport accident injury cover for all Victorians. Victoria is the second most populous state in Australia with about 4.5 million people, and approximately 3 million registered vehicles.

The TAC delivers benefits and compensation to people injured in transport accidents, including payment for:

• medical and rehabilitation treatment (these benefits are for the lifetime of the injured person, provided treatment is accident-related);
• loss of earnings; and
• support for dependants of people fatally injured.

Benefits are available irrespective of fault or accident blame and cover injuries resulting from accidents involving cars, buses, trams, trains etc. Premiums are typically A$255 (approx. US$180) per year, and covers personal injury only - not property damage.
The TAC:

- has assets of A$3.4 billion and liabilities of A$2.2 billion;
- receives almost A$700 million per year in premium income;
- has 28,000 claims under management;
- pays 400,000 accounts annually; and
- receives approximately 20,000 new claims each year.

Accident Prevention has become a key element of the TAC’s commercial strategy of running an effective and efficient insurance organisation. By targeting expenditure on accident prevention, the aim has been to save lives - and also dollars - at the stages of claims management and rehabilitation.

RISING ROAD TOLL

The TAC’s accident prevention strategy began in late 1989. It followed public outcry regarding the road toll and a shift in responsibilities for delivering road safety in Victoria.

In 1989 Victoria’s road toll reached 776 - the highest level in a decade - and experts agreed road deaths were trending strongly upward and predicted the toll would inevitably continue to climb as we entered the 1990s.

ROAD SAFETY STRATEGY

Traditional road safety campaigns seemed to have lost impact and there was a lack of new ideas. In conjunction with Victoria Police and VicRoads, the TAC developed a strategy based on:

- Evaluation and Research
- Education
- Engineering
- Enforcement

Evaluation/Research

The TAC invests heavily in evaluation and research. By utilising the vast claims division data base, in conjunction with police records, TAC is able to identify priority areas quickly and accurately.

In addition to using statistics to pinpoint problems, TAC constantly researches its accident prevention programs. Tracking studies monitor the effectiveness of advertising campaigns and the public’s responses to the highly emotive style of individual advertisements.

The Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC) researches and evaluates the overall effectiveness of the road safety strategy. MUARC has been able to assess the economic worth of the programs both to the Victorian community and to TAC as a business entity. The research also assesses the effectiveness of individual components of the overall strategy and what part they have played in reducing motor vehicle accidents.
Engineering

The TAC invests in engineering projects in two ways:

• Funding roadworks designed to eradicate Victoria’s worst accident blackspots;
• Funding the development of new technology for Police enforcement initiatives, such as breath analysis equipment, speed cameras etc.

Education

In the short term the TAC aims to educate Victorians about the dangers and consequences of drink/driving, speeding, poor concentration, fatigue etc. through hard hitting advertising campaigns. The emotive realism of the advertising is the result of research indicating that this approach was likely to have the greatest impact on motorists. Campaign messages are reinforced through high profile sponsorships and promotions.

In the long term, the TAC sees young people as the primary target and aims to educate them by developing products utilising new communication technologies which accurately relate to the emerging youth culture of the 1990s

Enforcement

As part of the overall integrated strategy, TAC has funded the development and supply of enforcement equipment designed to complement its education initiatives.

Examples include:

• a fleet of 13 mobile “booze buses”, each with the capacity to test 1,500 drivers per eight hour shift. TAC has also provided funding to assist in the staffing of the buses;
• 60 speed cameras;
• 150 “new generation” evidential breath testing units;
• roof mounted car signs, enabling individual patrol cars to act as highly visible random breath testers and
• mobile radar speed testing equipment.

RESULTS

The strategy is proving highly successful. In five years Victoria’s road toll has halved and serious injuries have fallen 40%. Last year’s road toll of 378 was the lowest since records were first kept almost 50 years ago, with 1992’s and 1993’s the second and third lowest respectively.

In fact, Victoria’s road safety record now leads the world. The internationally recognised measure of road safety is deaths per 10,000 vehicles - Victoria’s rate of 1.4 is one of the lowest, if not the lowest, of any major developed community.

During the past five and a half years, TAC has invested $145 million in accident prevention initiatives. Based on 1989 road trauma statistics, that investment is estimated to have saved
TAC $500 million in accident compensation and benefit payments. When broader costs to the community are taken into account, the savings climb to about $1.5 billion.

REDUCTION IN DRINK DRIVING

One of the areas where Victoria's road safety strategy has been most successfully applied is in reducing the incidence of drink driving in Victoria.

In 1989, 113 of all drivers and riders killed recorded a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) above .05%. By 1994, that figure had fallen to 50. Five years ago, about one in every 255 drivers tested were over the legal limit, while today the ratio is about 1:700.

The success of the drink/driving campaign was both significant and immediate. However, closer scrutiny of the figures revealed a major problem area.

The following case study looks at the introduction of an integrated Random Breath Testing (RBT) program in late 1993 aimed at addressing an alarming trend of an increased incidence of drink/driving in rural areas.

CASE STUDY: DRINK/DRIVING IN RURAL VICTORIA

By mid-1993, an alarming trend in road accident data was identified. While the Victorian road toll had been much the same as in 1992, the urban/rural mix had changed.

In metropolitan Melbourne and regional urban centres (e.g., Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo etc.) the road toll had declined by 10%. The rural road toll, however, had risen by 13%.

TAC research indicated that drink/driving was a major factor in the rural road toll. In 1992, one quarter of all drivers and riders killed in the country registered over .05%. By 1993, that figure had risen to 38%.

In country Victoria, breath testing numbers had fallen, reducing Random Breath Testing visibility. Anecdotally, it was apparent local grapevines were alerting residents to likely venues for RBT operations and encouraging a belief that you could drink and drive and avoid detection.

With the road safety strategy as a guide, the TAC and Victoria Police planned an integrated country RBT program for implementation by December 1993.

The first stage was to increase the Police presence throughout rural Victoria. Three fully staffed metropolitan-based booze buses were sent to regional Victorian centres every weekend. In addition a minimum of two booze buses (regionally based) also operated in regional Victoria.

Traffic Operation Group vehicles with overhead signs took responsibility for increased RBT in smaller centres, particularly on weekends during “Hi-Alctime” - the times of the day and week when car crashes are almost 10 times more likely to involve alcohol.

Accident data was analysed to identify optimal times and locations for RBT operations. Booze buses and police “overhead signed” vehicles were often moved from their usual rural base to other regions. This, along with the deployment of buses and staff from Melbourne, had a surprise element which made it difficult for local networks to advise where RBT
operations would be set up. It also meant smaller rural communities were no longer immune to RBT.

By relocating the metropolitan-based buses only on weekends, Melbourne and urban areas were still being serviced during its most dangerous drink/driving periods (Wednesday / Thursday / Friday) whilst testing could be substantially increased at times when rural drink driving was more likely (Saturday / Sunday). With increased RBT facilities available, police were able to double the number of projected random breath tests for 1994.

TAC and MUARC research has consistently shown that best results are achieved when enforcement is coupled with high profile media campaigns.

To support the enforcement initiatives, the TAC launched two mass regional media advertising campaigns.

The first highlighted the increased chance of being detected drink/driving on country roads. With increased visibility and enforcement in place, it was then necessary to alert country Victorians of the increased Police presence - a significant deterrent to would-be drink/drivers. The campaign included advertising on the Victorian country television networks, local radio and press, plus outdoor billboards.

The second campaign dispelled the misplaced notion that most of those killed on country roads were city drivers unfamiliar with local conditions. This perception was identified through research and contradicted the statistics which showed seven out of 10 people killed in the country were, in fact, from the country. The “Country People Die on Country Roads” campaign was launched in March 1994, and the slogan continues to follow all road safety campaigns aired in the regional Victoria.

Tracking studies conducted to measure the campaigns’ effectiveness showed that the “Country People Die on Country Roads” ad had a 90% recall amongst country motorists.

To reinforce the campaigns at a local level Police District Commanders were encouraged to use local media to profile the road toll situation and to advise of the build up of enforcement and the increased police presence in smaller rural communities. The emphasis of media and advertising was that prevention was better than detection.

**Results of Rural RBT Program**

The Country RBT program showed immediate results. Country random breath testing had been increased from some 350,000 tests in 1993 to over 700,000 tests in 1994. After just over a year in operation from early December 1993 to 31 December 1994, the accident statistics for rural Victoria had improved dramatically.

- 48 (20%) fewer people died on Victorian country roads in 1994 than 1993 (236 - 188).
- Of drivers and riders killed in rural areas in 1994, there was a 45% (38 to 21) drop in those registering over .05% BAC.
- Hi - Alctime fatalities decreased 30% from 133 in 1993 to 93 in 1994.
- The number of drivers testing over the legal limit decreased 21.6% from 1 in every 837 (in 1993) to 1 in 1067 (in 1994).
SUMMARY

We believe the cornerstone to the success of the country RBT campaign has been the close co-operation between TAC and Victoria Police. The campaigns success has also shown that by:

• taking a single minded approach;
• providing adequate resources;
• creating a co-ordinated campaign; and
• having a business agreement between TAC and Victoria Police on the delivery of the RBT program.

organizations can deliver programs that lift the profile of road safety and save lives.