



## More cash and less flashy ads

In the interests of road safety more money should be spent on road improvements, and less on advertising campaigns, argues John Culvenor.

In 1989 the road toll in Victoria was 776. In 1995 the road toll amounted to 418 deaths. Comparison of these two figures suggests a 46 percent improvement. With an overall national change of 28 percent this figure appears to herald Victoria as a national road safety leader.

Consequently the Victorian Transport Accident Commission (TAC) is regularly praised for what is seen as its pivotal role in this success.

In 1989 the TAC began a media campaign aimed at changing the behaviour of drivers. The campaign, continuing today, uses explicit recreations of accidents together with slogans like "speed kills" and "concentrate or kill".

The campaign has won advertising awards and is often applauded by the media. However, claims of Victoria's reign as road safety leader are open to question.

**Some facts about road fatalities:** In road safety, fatalities per 10,000 vehicles and fatalities per 100,000 population, are recognised standard measures.

While some may have us believe that recent Victorian efforts are somehow ahead of what is happening elsewhere in Australia, the truth is that: Victorian roads have a long history of being safer than those in other states and Victorian road safety improvement has been virtually identical to that of Australia over a long period.

The trends point to a consistency of approach between Victoria and Australia

as a whole, rather than to a unique Victorian approach. It is clear that progress in road safety has been continuous and I would argue this is due to incremental advancements in road and vehicle engineering. (See tables below)

**Careless driver theory:** Drivers involved in an accident can always be found to have done something wrong. This simplistic approach to accident analysis tells us that drivers behaved in an incorrect manner, therefore rules, enforcement or maybe some motivation will do the trick in changing the situation.

However this whole theory belongs in the "idea museum". It is a relic of an illogical approach to prevention that has been historically popular but should be long-discarded.

**Ordinary driver and bad design theory:** The careless driver model is an exercise in tail-chasing. The community can vent its outrage and lock up a few drivers, but if no changes are made to the road/vehicle system then new drivers come along and make the same old mistakes. In effect, the same old mistakes are designed into the system. These drivers too can be labelled as careless but there's no break in the tail-chasing until something with the vehicles or roads is changed.

Fortunately, there are abundant examples of good design progressively superseding bad design. Consider road design, and as an example reflect on how shopping has changed in recent times.

Once pedestrians had to wage a battle with passing traffic in strip-shopping centres. Thankfully, nowadays pedestrians at 'centres' are separated from motorists; be the motorists drunk or sober, careless or careful.

**Consider car engineering:** Take a look at the older cars at a car show. Consider what happens when soft flesh strikes those pointed wings on the back and those angular and unyielding shapes on the front. Inside, examine the steering column, note how it's firmly connected to the chassis, shaped like a spear, and aimed squarely at the driver's chest. Fortunately car design has given way to more yielding, compliant and rounded shapes, inside and out.

**Getting top value for public money:** Apparently the TAC is set to spend \$30 million this year on another campaign. One wonders if advertising is the optimum use of injury prevention money raised through car registrations. Alternatives could be found in the areas of road or motor vehicle research. Perhaps the direct funding of road or vehicle improvements could also be a spending alternative?

In the last financial year, 150,000 new vehicles were purchased in Victoria. Perhaps the TAC could use \$30 million to offer a \$200 cheque to anyone who purchased a new car with an air bag fitted. Alternatively, the TAC could use \$30 million to construct 300 roundabouts (at the cost of about \$100,000 each) at poorly-controlled, high-accident intersections.

These programs provide an alternative way to utilise public funds to make genuine changes to the road/vehicle system. If the long-term improvements in road safety are to be extended then we need to continually focus on improvements to the roads and vehicles that have already provided proven rewards for safety.

Good design examples are everywhere, we just need more of them, so as to guarantee continued improvement in road safety.

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