

# Messaging Recommendations for Effective Road Safety Campaigns: Lessons From Formative Research for Seat-Belt Campaigns

**Formative research is undertaken to help guide the development of effective road safety campaigns. This guide incorporates findings from studies of a range of road safety video advertisements designed to increase seat-belt wearing for all vehicle occupants. The studies were undertaken by Vital Strategies as part of the World Health Organization RS-10 Project and Bloomberg Philanthropies Initiative for Global Road Safety (BIGRS) from 2010 to 2020 in nine low- and middle-income countries including China, Ethiopia and Indonesia. This guide is designed to assist governments and civil society in developing seat-belt-wearing campaigns.**

## Research Methodology

Message testing research—a type of formative research—is designed to identify the messages, communication approaches and execution styles most likely to influence changes in targeted road safety behaviors.<sup>1,2</sup>

The goal of this type of research is to gather feedback from drivers on draft concepts or finalized public service announcements (PSAs) to be used in road safety campaigns. This includes assessing audience feedback on comprehension, acceptability, credibility, relevance and perceived influence of concepts or PSAs on road safety behaviors. This research also identifies aspects of the creative concepts or PSAs that could be improved for the local setting, including removing irrelevant content and addressing any problems with the language used in voiceovers or screen text.

Typically, a professional research agency is contracted to conduct message-testing research. In most cases, these studies incorporate quantitative (using an individual rating questionnaire) and qualitative (conducting a group discussion) methodologies within a focus group structure. The number of groups and participants is determined by the geographical scope and study format. Each study generally comprises 10 to 12 focus groups with about 10 participants in each in-person group and four to six participants per online group. To maximize relevance of group discussions, focus group participants within a study are segmented into groups by age, gender, socio-economic level and type of road user.

## Messages Selected for Testing

Message testing studies include concepts or PSAs with a range of types of messages, communication approaches and execution styles, to identify the most effective ways to communicate with target audiences to influence the road safety behavior that the campaign will focus on. They can be broadly categorized as:

- *Instructional*, with expert instruction on how not wearing a seat-belt, or not properly fastening the seat-belt, results in greater risk of significant negative outcomes in a motor vehicle crash. This approach is designed to increase perceptions of personal risk if driving or traveling as a passenger in a motor vehicle without a properly fastened seat-belt, regardless of the driver's own perceived driving abilities.
- *Consequence* concepts or PSAs focus specifically on the negative consequences of experiencing a motor vehicle crash while not wearing a properly fastened seat-belt. These include:
  - Direct impacts: risk of injury, loss of life or loss of quality of life for the motor vehicle driver or passenger.
  - Impacts on the driver's or passenger's family: consideration of what would become of the families following injury or death after not wearing a seat-belt.
  - Emotional impacts: consideration of the impact of lifelong guilt and regret for the motor vehicle driver if a passenger is injured or killed when not wearing a seat-belt; loss of future life opportunities resulting from the driver's or passenger's serious injury; and the impact of a death or serious injury on the driver's or passenger's loved ones.

<sup>1</sup> Road safety mass media campaigns: a toolkit. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2016. Available in English, Spanish.

<sup>2</sup> Road Safety Best Practice Communication Guide. Vital Strategies; 2020.

- Benefits of correct road safety behavior: consideration of the benefits of ensuring the driver and passengers have the protection of wearing a properly fastened seat-belt when traveling in a motor vehicle.
- *Testimonials* depict the consequences of experiencing a road crash when not wearing a seat-belt from the perspective of a personal story or experience of a crash survivor or victim's family, often portrayed with a strong emotional tone.
- *Enforcement* concepts or PSAs focus on increasing risk perceptions of being detected by law enforcement and receiving fines or other penalties for not wearing a seat-belt when traveling in a motor vehicle. This may be accomplished by highlighting enforcement strategies and describing various legal and administrative consequences of seat-belt violations.

## Key Features and Principles of Effective Seat-Belt Campaign Materials

Across countries, message testing studies have shown that road safety PSAs with strong emotional engagement and a clear depiction of the health and social consequences of crashes are rated highly effective by drivers in promoting safer driving behaviors. Lifestyle and personal testimonials have also consistently been found to be more effective than metaphorical or humorous PSAs. For seat-belt wearing PSAs, research also highlights the greater perceived effectiveness of instructional-style PSAs, which demonstrate the severity of consequences for a driver or passenger in a crash when not wearing a seat-belt, compared with someone who is wearing a properly fastened seat-belt. These PSAs can increase risk perceptions for motor vehicle drivers and passengers about not wearing a properly fastened seat-belt.

Findings from message-testing studies provide insights into the most effective ways to engage target audiences and influence driver behaviors. Considering these findings within the frameworks of established theories of behavior change and best practices of road safety strategic communication campaigns can increase the effectiveness of campaign design and the potential to influence drivers' behaviors. This is particularly true when effectively combined with best-practice, high-visibility road safety law enforcement. Over time, these engaging campaigns can contribute to changing social norms among road users.

## Seat-Belt PSA Execution Principles

The following are guidelines identified through seat-belt message-testing studies to improve the effectiveness of campaign communication messages and executional styles.

1. Clearly demonstrate the difference in severity of outcomes from a motor vehicle crash when a driver or passenger is properly wearing a seat-belt in contrast to when not wearing a seat-belt or not wearing a properly fastened seat-belt. These outcomes can include serious injury or fatality for a driver or passenger, their loss of future opportunities, the impact of a person's death or injury on their family, or the guilt of the driver allowing the passenger to travel without wearing a seat-belt.
2. Depict the dramatization of a realistic, culturally relevant story, including common excuses for not wearing a seat-belt, such as discomfort, contrasted with the serious consequences experienced in a crash when traveling without wearing a seat-belt.
3. Model how to properly fasten a seat-belt, including an audio cue of "clicking" the seat-belt fastener.
4. Communicate clearly that crashes causing serious injuries when not wearing a seat-belt can occur even when traveling only a short distance and when traveling at a moderate speed.
5. Avoid depicting a motor vehicle driver who is not wearing a seat-belt also displaying other risky behaviors such as speeding or reckless driving, so that the focus of PSA remains on the consequences of not properly wearing a seat-belt.
6. Show the motor vehicle driver or passenger who is injured in a crash as being an ordinary person that viewers can relate to and ensure the depiction of location, vehicles and road conditions are relevant to the intended campaign audience and setting, with an appropriately serious tone.
7. Depict the injury consequences to the driver or passenger in a motor vehicle crash as being preventable if they had been properly wearing seat-belts. This is to increase the viewer's perceived self-efficacy to avoid such consequences by always wearing a seat-belt.
8. Use a reputable expert if presenting information about the consequences of experiencing a motor vehicle crash without wearing a seat-belt (*instructional* style). Generally, health experts such as emergency physicians, especially if well known in the community, are seen as trustworthy sources of credible health information.
9. Conclude the communication with a clear and specific behavioral "call to action" about always wearing a properly fastened seat-belt; the call to action should be consistent with the logic of the story being depicted and the campaign's behavioral objective.
10. Support risk communication about consequences of driving or traveling in a motor vehicle without wearing a properly fastened seat-belt with messaging about police road safety enforcement activities to increase perceptions of risk of detection and punishment (*enforcement* style).
11. Promote police road safety enforcement activities as making a key contribution to preventing crashes and saving lives.

See PSAs reflecting these principles at Vital Strategies' Road Safety Program resources page:  
[www.vitalstrategies.org/roadsafetycampaigns](http://www.vitalstrategies.org/roadsafetycampaigns).

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