

‘MDT – Mobile Drug Testing’: Using research to develop the first drug driving public education campaign in NSW

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Abstract

In December 2015, the first NSW public education campaign targeting illicit drug driving ‘MDT – Mobile Drug Testing’ was launched. The campaign is part of a co-ordinated approach to deterring drug driving by combining enhanced police enforcement with public education.

The campaign targets beliefs about enforcement, particularly the perceived likelihood of being caught drug driving. It was developed in partnership with the NSW Police Force and is based on insights from crash data and research exploring the behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of NSW drivers who use illicit drugs. Early post-campaign research suggests key messages have resonated with the target audience.

Background

In March 2015, the NSW Government announced a threefold increase in roadside drug testing in NSW by 2017. The policy was driven by Transport for NSW research identifying that 14% of fatalities on NSW roads over the period 2010-14 involved a driver or rider with at least one of three illicit drugs (cannabis, speed, ecstasy) in their system. To enhance the deterrence provided by increased testing, Transport for NSW developed a public education campaign in 2015.

Research insights and campaign development

Fatal crash analysis and insights from a survey exploring the behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of NSW drivers who self-reported illicit drug use (Taverner Research, 2015) were central to defining the communication approach.

The research highlighted that drug drivers in NSW are not yet convinced they will be caught. The reasons that drivers feel they were unlikely to be caught are based on perceptions about enforcement, including frequency, mobility and spread of drug testing. Many users also think their drug use does not impair their driving skills or elevate their crash risk (Taverner Research, 2015).

These insights highlighted challenges when communicating to this audience. First, illicit drug users may be resistant to communications focusing on the effect of drugs on driving skills, particularly if these are perceived to be inconsistent with personal beliefs. Campaign messages or concepts that could be perceived as condemning drug use rather than drug driving behaviour may also be rejected. Second, knowledge about how drug testing is conducted is uneven among users, with low levels of personal experience of testing.

Previous research established that increasing the perceived likelihood of detection by roadside breath testing (RBT) was initially critical to changing drink driving behaviour by NSW drivers (Job, Prabhakar & Lee, 1997). Due to the parallels between drug users’ current attitudes and attitudes to drink driving in the early implementation of RBT, a campaign to support enforcement was identified as most likely to quickly shift behaviour. In the long term, there is also a need for communications to address some drivers’ beliefs about crash risks and drug driving.

Campaign execution and success

The ‘MDT – Mobile Drug Testing’ campaign introduces a new acronym, MDT, to the road safety vernacular in NSW, highlights the increased scale and mobility of testing and features the roadside testing process. The campaign was developed in close partnership with the NSW Police Force to ensure a credible voice and realistic depiction.

The campaign includes a 30-second and a 15-second television advertisement featuring stationary roadside MDT and MDT conducted by a patrolling police vehicle. The executions directly challenge beliefs about how and when enforcement is conducted. Campaign imagery (*Figure 1*) leverages driver familiarity with RBT to connect MDT with high-visibility RBT operations, and illustrates the drug testing process. The advertisement is supported by radio, online material, and outdoor media. Where possible, campaign activity is scheduled around police operations to maximise deterrence.

Post-campaign research commenced in late January 2016. Results are pending but early indications suggest high levels of campaign recall, awareness and message take-out.



Figure 1 – MDT – Campaign imagery

References

- Job, R.F.S, Prabhakar, T., Lee, S.H.V (1997) *The long term benefits of random breath testing in NSW (Australia): Deterrence and social disapproval of drink driving*. Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety, 21-26 September 1997, Annecy, France, 841-848.
- Taverner Research (2015). *Illicit Drug Using Drivers in NSW*. Unpublished Research Report prepared for Transport for NSW.