Targeting Novice Drivers: A Review of Victoria’s Key Messages and Delivery Channels

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Abstract

To support young driver safety and preparation for licensing, an ever increasing amount of information has been developed for learner and probationary drivers. A recent review of these communications has revealed that much of the information was not being read, even when it had been specifically developed to help prepare for licensing.

The introduction in Victoria of new measures for novice drivers provided an opportunity for the TAC and VicRoads to commission a review of communications aimed at improving young driver safety. The review, conducted by communications psychologist, Barry Elliott involved:
- documenting Victorian developed resources and programs targeting young driver safety and the key messages emanating from each;
- identifying gaps and overlaps in key messages and resources; and
- making recommendations for the updating, deletion or development of new resources.

The review identified, among other things, that there was no shortage of information provided to young drivers and their parents, but that much of it was not delivered in the most effective and/or timely manner.

Based on the review, a continuum was developed that identifies the most appropriate information and key messages for each target audience and the most appropriate stage for delivery. This continuum will guide the formation of a communication strategy for more effective targeting of novice drivers and their parents.

This paper will describe the review process, recommendations for key messages and the development of a communication strategy for novice drivers.

Keywords

Novice Driver, key messages, targeting

Introduction

Despite some gains, young drivers are still overrepresented in the road toll in Victoria. In 2008, young drivers aged between 18 and 25 years made up 26% of all driver fatalities despite accounting for approximately 14% of all licence holders (Transport Accident Commission of Victoria, 2009; TAC). In addition, young drivers continue to have more crashes than any other road users, and car crashes kill more young people than any other causes. Research suggests that lack of experience, limited ability and judgement, underestimation of risks and deliberate risk taking behaviours contribute to increased crash rates for novice drivers. In particular young people are overrepresented in crashes involving excessive speed, driver fatigue and/or alcohol use (Vassallo et al., 2007).

In light of the research, the new Graduated Licensing System (GLS) measures have been introduced by the Victorian Government to make young drivers safer and better drivers. The final stage of implementation was complete from the 1st of July 2008.

New GLS measures for Learner Drivers include:
- Learner drivers (aged under 21 years) holding their permit for a minimum of 12 months before applying for their probationary licence.
- Learner drivers (aged under 21 years) logging at least 120 hours of supervised driving practice, including a minimum of 10 hours night driving, before they can apply for their probationary license.
- Learner drivers carrying their permit when they drive.
- Learner drivers not using a mobile phone, handheld or hands free, or any messaging of any kind, while driving.
In addition, the GLS has meant the introduction of several new measures for Probationary drivers, including:

- A two stage, four-year probationary licence phase. The first stage is the P1 licence for 12 months, followed by a three year P2 licence.
- P1 drivers can only carry one peer passenger aged between 16 and 21 years (inclusive).
- Probationary drivers, or any driver aged under 26 years, charged with a drink driving offence with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.07 or higher, will have an alcohol ignition interlock fitted to their car when they return to driving.
- Probationary drivers will be subject to restrictions on driving high-powered vehicles.
- P1 drivers are not able to use a mobile phone, handheld or hands free, or any messaging of any kind, while driving.
- All probationary drivers must have a good driving record to progress to the next stage of licensing. A good driving record means the applicant avoids having his/her probationary licence cancelled or suspended, as well as avoids any drink and/or drug driving offences.

The introduction of new measures in Victoria for novice drivers provided an opportunity for the TAC and VicRoads to commission a review of communications aimed at improving young driver safety.

**Current Novice Driver communication strategy**

To support young driver safety and preparation for licensing, an ever increasing amount of information has been developed for learner and probationary drivers. As this group is acknowledged as difficult to target, the Victorian road safety partners have tended to take a ‘scatter-gun’ approach to communicating with novice drivers. This has resulted in the communication of particular messages in multiple resources, to increase the exposure of that message. As well, many messages are targeted at times when novice drivers are most engaged, read the resources and are more likely to absorb the messages. There are also many messages included in some resources due to community concern, which increases the amount of information that is given to novice drivers.

Although the ‘scatter-gun’ approach has traditionally may be seen as an ineffective approach for communicating messages, there has been no evidence to suggest that this is the incorrect approach for targeting novice drivers. However, the introduction of the GLS in Victoria identified that many current key messages may no longer be relevant. This prompted a review of the key messages for novice drivers and their parents.

**Reviewing key messages and delivery channels for Novice Drivers in Victoria**

In 2009 the TAC and VicRoads collaborated to commission communications psychologist Barry Elliott to undertake a review of the communications provided by the key road safety agencies in Victoria that are aimed at improving young driver safety.

The primary aim of the project was to develop a continuum that identified information, key messages, target audiences and the most appropriate timing of message delivery for novice drivers and their parents from the pre learner phase until full unrestricted licensing.

The review, involved three stages:

- identification and documentation of Victorian developed resources and programs targeting young driver safety and the key messages emanating from each;
- categorisation and prioritisation of key messages and deciding on the most appropriate timing and target; and
- identification of gaps and overlaps in key messages and resources and recommendations for the updating, deletion or development of new resources.
Stage 1: Identification and documentation of current communications.

For the first stage of the review, Elliott undertook an extensive cataloguing process to identify and document the current key messages and information that are presented in the key resources produced by TAC and VicRoads for novice drivers and their supervising drivers. The identification and documentation process resulted in a substantial document with the complete list of key messages and supporting information, which was summarised to contain only the key messages for each resource. These documents showed that there is no shortage of messages for young drivers and that the communication methods may not be appropriate. These key resources are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Key resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource/Intervention /Material</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traffic Safety Essentials – secondary school resource</td>
<td>Teachers of Pre Learner/Learner drivers</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>TAC</td>
<td>TSE is targeted at Year 10 students, the last year of compulsory education in Victoria. This is a time when many students are obtaining their learner permits and are engaged with the licensing process and may be more likely to absorb the information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keys Please – delivered in schools and community settings</td>
<td>Parents of Learner Drivers</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>VicRoads</td>
<td>Keys Please is targeted at Parents, a difficult audience to target.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner Kit – provided by VicRoads at time of Learner Permit issue</td>
<td>Learner Drivers and their Supervising Drivers</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>VicRoads</td>
<td>The Learner Kit includes predominantly road safety messages and is provided at a time when Learners are about to begin practising and are more likely to read and absorb the information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L120 HELP pack – direct mail after holding Learner Permit for 3 months</td>
<td>Learner Drivers and their parents</td>
<td>No longer relevant, given 120 hours requirement</td>
<td>TAC</td>
<td>The HELP pack was delivered to Learners after holding their permit for 3 months, a time when they may be starting to lose interest in driving practice, to encourage them to obtain 120 hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L120 Scratchie – direct mail at Christmas time</td>
<td>Learner Drivers</td>
<td>No longer relevant, given 120 hours requirement and log book</td>
<td>TAC</td>
<td>The L120 scratchie was delivered to Learner drivers at Christmas time. This resource was designed to encourage Learners to obtain practice at a time when they may be going on long car journey’s with their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive Smart – Marketed in HELP pack and provided upon request</td>
<td>Learner drivers</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>TAC</td>
<td>An interactive CD Rom to assist with preparation for the Hazard Perception Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Name</td>
<td>Target Group</td>
<td>Delivery Channel</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road to Solo Driving - Learner Drivers</td>
<td>Learner Drivers</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>This is the primary resource for young drivers from the pre learner stage. This resource includes road rules as well as road safety messages. Targeted at a time when young drivers are engaged with the licensing process and are most likely to read the resource.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L Site – marketed in Learner Kit</td>
<td>Learner Drivers</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>A support resource for the Learner Kit. Targets Learners online.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAC Cup – TAC community partnership targeting players and parents</td>
<td>Pre Learner /Learner Drivers and their parents</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>The TAC cup program targets predominantly young male drivers. Parents are also targeted in this program through the football clubs. Focuses on role modelling and increasing supervised driving practice in all conditions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLS sub site – <a href="http://www.gls.arrivealive.vic.gov.au">www.gls.arrivealive.vic.gov.au</a></td>
<td>Pre Learner drivers and novice drivers aged up to 26 years. Parents/ Supervising drivers</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>Repository for all information regarding the new GLS. Targeting young drivers and parents online.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fit to Drive – community program targeting senior years of secondary schools</td>
<td>Learner Drivers</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>Centres on a peer facilitated session at year 11 – focuses on choices and risks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Little Black Envelope’ pack – provided at time of P1 licence</td>
<td>P1 Drivers and their parents</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>Information given at time of P1 licensing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Make a film. Make a difference.’ short film competition (MAFMAD)</td>
<td>18 to 25 year olds</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>Peer to peer communication. Based on research that young people do not always respond well to communication from authoritative figures.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 2: Categorisation and Prioritisation of messages.

The documentation of key messages revealed that there are an abundance of messages and resources provided to novice drivers and their parents. Due to the large number of messages identified, it was necessary to sort the messages into categories and determine which messages are important, particularly with the new GLS measures in place. Initially Elliott categorised the messages by timing (i.e., Pre-Learner, Learner, P-Platers), by audience/target group e.g., Parent/Carer messages, by delivery method, e.g., websites and by source e.g., VicRoads. As several messages were targeted at more than one of the stages, messages were categorised by priority for specific target groups or by message type.

These categories include:

(I) Drive Safely
   a. Basic Information
   b. The Driving Task
   c. The Learning Task
   d. Management
   e. Risks
   f. Perceptions

(II) Fulfilling legal obligations and responsibilities
   g. Requirements
   h. Expectations
   i. Application

(III) Drive Co-operatively
   j. Co-operation

(IV) Being a Good Passenger
   k. Issues for Passengers

(V) Parents/Supervisors
   l. Issues for parents of Learners
   m. Issues for parents of P Plate drivers

Each of the key messages under these categories was rated for importance (High, Medium or Low) for each of seven stages of licensure and for parents/supervising drivers. The seven stages included: Pre-Pre-L, Pre-L, Early-L, Late-L, P1, P2 and Post P. Additionally, the messages were rated for importance to parents/supervisors. Each message was rated independently of other messages for importance. As part of the categorisation process, Elliott identified gaps where messages could be targeted to specific audiences or at particular times. The ratings were initially assigned independently by key personnel from the TAC and VicRoads. A workshop was then held with Elliott and both agencies to discuss the importance that should be given to each key message.

Initially most of the key messages were rated as high in importance. A further workshop was required to further determine which messages were the most important, rating each between 1 to 5 (5 being most important), in particular those that were rated ‘high’ in the initial workshop. This enabled the list to be narrowed to those messages which were determined to be of greatest importance.

Stage 3: Identification of gaps and overlaps

The next stage involved the cataloguing of high priority messages and the identification of potential gaps and overlaps within the resources that are provided to novice drivers and their parents/supervisors. Elliott catalogued the high priority messages by stage and this was used to prompt discussion of gaps and overlaps with VicRoads and the TAC. At this point in the project, the form of communication was also discussed extensively.

These discussions enabled Elliott to prepare a report for the TAC and VicRoads on the most important key messages for novice drivers and their parents, gaps and overlaps in communication and recommendations for potential new messages.
Conclusions

Pre-Pre-Learner stage (15 years old and younger)

No key messages were given high priority for Pre-Pre-Learner Drivers during the review. Elliott suggested that alternatively parents/supervising drivers should be targeted to raise their awareness for role modelling, as their child/teen is watching their driving habits.

Pre-Learner stage (approximately 15 to 16 years old)

During the review it was decided that the overarching message for pre-learners would be ‘Get your L’s early and gain at least two full years’ practice. This message is new and will need to be built into all pre-Learner stage resources.

As the Learner test was identified as a key point of motivation for young people, it was also suggested that the existing Learner Test could be revised to ensure key road safety information was read and understood. For example, the key resource used to prepare for the Learner Test is the ‘Road to Solo Driving’. Additional road safety questions could be included in the ‘managing risk section’.

To assist people to prepare for the Learner Test, VicRoads provides an online practice test. Changes could be made to the questions so that Pre-Learners must successfully complete questions relating to road safety before being able to access the practice road rules questions. Furthermore, increasing the fee for attempting the Learner Permit test may discourage inadequate preparation and subsequent failure.

Early – L Stage (0 to 70 hours of supervised driving practice)

Four Key messages were decided upon as overarching key messages during the review for the Early-L stage. These include:

- Learning to drive is not easy and involves four different stages.
- To develop your driving nothing beats supervised practice so plan when and where you will practice.
- Log all your practice sessions.
- Whilst driving involves risk of harm you are the safest you will ever be as a supervised Learner Driver.

These messages currently exist in the materials/resources, but will need to be further highlighted in communications to Learner drivers. These overarching messages are supported by several subordinate messages. Many of these subordinate messages, e.g., ‘on the road practice is far more important than lessons’, need to be strengthened throughout the current Learner Driver resources.

The review process also highlighted the potential for an interactive website where Learners can log their hours and be given feedback regarding what they should do next. This would also provide an opportunity for VicRoads and the TAC to communicate directly with Learner Drivers on road safety messages.

Late-L Stage (70+ hours of supervised driving practice)

For the Late-L stage, the overarching message identified during the review was ensuring that the 120 hours of practice encompassed a variety of different driving, traffic, road and weather conditions. Whilst this message is already communicated in the L Kit, it needs to be strengthened, given that 120 hours is mandatory in the GLS. This message is supported by several subordinate messages, (e.g., ‘variety of practice is just as important as the amount of practice you undertake’) which need to be strengthened throughout the current resources, such as the L Kit.
P1 Stage

There are several overarching messages for P1 drivers that were identified during the review. These include:

- Every P plate driver is at risk, because you are not as experienced.
- Reduce your risk: adopt low risk driving strategies.
- Keep your licence: new rules for P1 drivers.
- Your driving performance will continue to improve for years.
- Being a safe passenger.

These are supported by several subordinate messages such as ‘becoming a better driver depends on practicing safe driving strategies’. Several of these messages are not included in the current resources and will need to be considered for inclusion in future resources.

P2 Stage

There are several overarching messages for P2 drivers that were identified during the review. These include:

- Maintain risk free driving.
- Driving improvement continues for many years.
- Keep your license: new rules for P2 drivers.

These messages are supported by several subordinate messages, for example ‘zero BAC for P drivers’. Many of these were existing messages; however several new subordinate messages (e.g., ‘subtle speed control is crucial to becoming a good safe driver’) were also suggested for consideration for new resources.

Post-P / Full License Stage

The overarching messages that were identified during the review process for the Post-P stage were:

- Maintain risk free driving
- Keeping your license: penalties for drink/drug driving.

These messages are supported by several subordinate messages e.g., ‘keep your distance: the 2 to 3 second rule’. However, as this group is difficult to communicate with, it was suggested that a letter could be included in the post with their full licence incorporating these few messages or a brochure focussing on keeping their full license.

Parents / supervising drivers of learner drivers

Several messages were identified during the review process as overarching messages for the parents of learner drivers. These include:

- Your learner’s safety is in your hands. Give them the practice they need.
- Learning to drive is not easy and involves four key stages.
- To develop a safe driver nothing beats supervised practice so make sure they get at least 120 hours logged practice.
- Whilst driving involves risk of harm, your Learner is the safest they will ever be as a supervised Learner Driver, so make sure they practice at different times and in different conditions.

These are supported by several subordinate messages, e.g., Inexperience is the main reason novice drivers crash’. Many of the messages already exist, but the communication needs to be strengthened.

Parents / supervising drivers of P-Plate drivers

The overarching message that was identified for the parents of P-Plate drivers was “helping your P driver stay safe”. This is supported by several subordinate messages (e.g., driving at night is very risky for P-plate drivers). These messages already exist.
Next Steps

The review has enabled the identification of the key messages and information that are currently relevant for Novice Drivers for all stages of the licensing process. VicRoads and the TAC will now seek to produce a communications strategy to effectively target young drivers with the relevant key messages at specific stages of the licensing process. It is anticipated that the communication strategy may include many of the current resources, but these may be targeted differently or positioned to integrate better with the communication strategy. New resources to address identified gaps are also likely to be a part of the communication strategy.

Summary

The review conducted by Barry Elliott that was initiated by the TAC and VicRoads has highlighted some important directions for novice driver communications. The current resources are jam-packed with road safety messages that can often be repetitive. After the introduction of the new GLS measures in Victoria, many of the key messages in current resources no longer hold the level of relevance as pre-GLS and could be removed to enable messages that are of a higher priority.

This review has allowed the key agencies to collaborate and identify the messages of the highest priority. These have been identified for each stage of licensure and for parents. Gaps have also been identified.

Moving forward, this review will provide a basis for a communications strategy. This will enable VicRoads and the TAC to work together to effectively target novice drivers and their parents.

References

Elliott, B. (unpublished) Identifying and optimising key times and key audiences for messages targeting novice drivers aged 15 – 26 years.

