

## **Improving the Safety Performance of Australian Vehicles – a Consumer Focused Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the late 1990s, despite having an excellent new car assessment program (ANCAP) and a Used Car Safety Rating program which assesses vehicles safety performance in the real world, very few car buyers in Australia were aware that information was available to help assess a vehicle's safety performance. Even if consumers were aware of the information, compared with Europe and the US, choosing a vehicle with good safety performance usually meant buying an expensive import.

In 2000, the Transport Accident Commission in Victoria, Australia, noting European estimates of reductions that could be expected in road trauma if the safety of the vehicle fleet could be substantially improved, made a decision to invest heavily in a public education (demand led) approach to improving vehicle safety. Off the back of the development of a searchable website on vehicle safety, the TAC launched the [howsafeisyourcar.com.au](http://howsafeisyourcar.com.au) public education campaign – which urged car buyers to consider safety as their number one criteria when purchasing their next car. The campaign including TV and radio ads, print, on-line and outdoor media, has been successful in its aim of increasing consumer knowledge about vehicle safety and encouraging manufacturers to make safer vehicles available to the Australian market. This paper will map the development of this campaign and present the results of Victoria's consumer led approach to vehicle safety.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the late 1990's Australian states became aware of the importance of vehicle safety in the mix of initiatives designed to reduce road trauma. Despite its developed economy and love of the motor car, Australian vehicles were on average (based on star ratings) far less safe than those of Northern Europe and North America. Australia had a well developed crash test program, the Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) and a unique to Australia Used Car Safety Rating program (UCSR),

yet Australian car buyers had little awareness of these ratings programs or vehicle safety issues.

The Transport Accident Commission (TAC) works with its road safety partners Victoria Police, VicRoads and Department of Justice to reduce the number and severity of injury crashes in Victoria, Australia. The TAC was recognised for its internationally for its public education campaigns about issues such as drinking and driving, non-restraint wearing and fatigue. Noting European estimates of the benefits of a safer vehicle fleet and the success of agencies in the US in promoting vehicle safety, the TAC believed that it could use social marketing techniques to educate Victorian car buyers that vehicle safety should be high on their list of priorities when purchasing a car., that they deserved vehicles as safe as those being offered to their European and American counterparts and in turn consumers would create a demand for safer vehicles in the Victorian and Australian vehicle markets.

### **BACKGROUND**

During the late 1990's, Victoria was fortunate to have an architect of Sweden's 'Vision Zero' (Claes Tingvall) join the Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC) as its Director. 'Vision Zero' was a new philosophy to most Australian Road Safety practitioners and introduced the idea that improving the safety of the vehicle fleet could substantially reduce the number and severity of injury crashes.

Victoria had been a leader in road safety. It was the first state in the world to introduce compulsory seat belt wearing law in 1970, the first jurisdiction in the world to have random road side breath testing via booze buses (1989) and later, the first jurisdiction to introduce random road side drug testing (2005). It had developed internationally acclaimed public education campaigns addressing drinking and driving (If you drink, then drive, you're a bloody idiot) and Speed (Speed Kills)<sup>1</sup>, had a well developed road safety infrastructure (Blackspot)

program and well resourced police force. As a result it had a good long term record in reducing road trauma<sup>2</sup>.

Yet, it was Claes Tingvall who brought to Victoria's attention the potential that improving the safety of its vehicle fleet could have in reducing trauma. Tingvall during his time at MUARC often quoted a simple European Transport Safety Council (ETSC) statistic, which indicated that if you could move everybody to the safest vehicle in their class, serious road trauma (in Europe) could be halved. Given the average age of vehicles was less and safety performance of vehicles greater in Europe, this was likely to be true for Australia also.

At this time Australia had a range of information available to car purchasers. The Australasian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) was well established and used results from both its own tests and EuroNCAP tests on vehicles applicable to the Australian market. Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC) based on police crash data from across Australia and New Zealand, had developed a well regarded Used Car Safety Ratings program (UCSR) that provided relevant safety information to car buyers in the second hand market. These programs were well supported by state Government agencies and the Automobile Associations (AAs) across Australia. Despite this, it was believed that Victorian car buyers:

- had very little awareness that there was information that could assist them purchase a safer vehicle
- were not sure where to obtain safety information and
- did not rate safety highly in their car purchase decisions.
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Research undertaken subsequently supported this view (see below).

The TAC, at this time was not a member of ANCAP or the UCSR program, but had considerable expertise in social marketing (road safety). The TAC (Transport Accident Commission) is Victoria, Australia's (monopoly) third party vehicle insurer for transport injury. A quasi government authority, the TAC is responsible for the medical, rehabilitation and loss of earnings costs for all Victorian's injured in a car crash. The Transport Accident Act 1986 (TAA), established the TAC scheme and guides its business. Two objects of the TAA support its involvement and heavy investment in road safety:

- to reduce the cost to the Victorian community of compensation for transport accidents; and

- to reduce the incidence of transport accidents.

The TAC identified the potential for a well designed, high quality website that would pull together ANCAP and UCSR data as well as other vehicle safety information. The website would be promoted via a mass media campaign. Around this time the TAC became aware of websites in the US promoting vehicle safety ratings eg Money.com (safestcars website), the IIHS website, that seemed to be gaining good visitation.

Very little was known about Victorian or Australian car buyers understanding of new vehicle crash tests, vehicle star ratings or particular vehicle safety features. Certainly, the only manufacturers promoting their vehicles on safety in their own advertising campaigns were major European brands such as Volvo and Mercedes. Initial searches looking at vehicle advertising internationally indicated that even where the car models being sold in Australia were the same as in Europe and/or North America, they were not being marketed in the same way. An example was the Subaru Forester first sold in the US in 2000 and Australia in 2001; the US model came standard with ESC and was marketed on being a safe family car. The Australian model didn't have ESC and was promoted primarily on its boxer engine! It was common for models being imported into Australia to have fewer standard safety features and in some cases they couldn't be ordered, even though they were available on the same models elsewhere in the world.

The TAC also noted that many manufacturers were actively, avoiding use of any star ratings on their vehicles. When Renault Australia decided to promote its new Laguna's 5 star (EuroNCAP) rating, it was apparently met with disapproval from the Federal Chamber of Automotive Industries (FAI) who represented many car makers and importers in Australia<sup>3</sup>

In 2001/2002, the TAC worked with its road safety partners, VicRoads and Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) to better understand Victorian car buyers' knowledge and interest in vehicle safety by undertaking some initial research (TAC<sup>4</sup> and RACV<sup>5</sup>)

Using this research, the Victorian road safety partners were able to develop a strategy to improve the safety of the Victorian vehicle fleet, a large part of which was the marketing strategy developed by the TAC.

#### **INITIAL CONSUMER RESEARCH**

Market research undertaken for the TAC by Sweeney Research<sup>6</sup> in early 2002 interviewed

people who intended to purchase a car in the next 12 – 18 months. The research indicated that in relation to car purchase decisions:

- price was the dominating factor
- comfort, brand, size and colour all entered into the purchase equation
- safety did not feature highly in their vehicle purchase criteria, particularly those buying at the lower price end of the market.
- few were aware of how they would evaluate a car in terms of safety
- car buyers assumed new cars, because they commonly had ABS and driver airbags were safe (although many had the belief that airbags were dangerous because they could ‘go off’ prematurely).
- while few had heard of ANCAP or were aware of vehicle safety star ratings, they were aware that the RACV was a good place to start for information.
- almost nobody had heard of the UCSR program
- the main safety features of interest were ABS brakes, driver visibility, body weight (so you aren’t blasted off the road when a truck passes), body/impact strength and driver airbags.
- it was important the information came from a credible source (motoring journalists and the RACV were considered credible in the vehicle safety space) and TAC had strong credibility in the road safety space.
- a website about vehicle safety was considered well within the TAC’s charter.

Consumers indicated that they would be interested in getting more information about vehicle safety but would not spend much time researching i.e. safety information needed to be easily accessible.

Most people were interested in online information and wanted a one stop shop i.e. new car, used car and other vehicle safety information on the one site. They wanted information to be provided in a searchable form and from an authoritative organisation (TAC and RACV were considered credible). At this point most of the information produced by ANCAP and the UCSR program was in brochure form. Some auto clubs and road safety agencies had information available on their websites but it could be difficult to find and awareness of its availability was low.

### **The Consumer Led Strategy**

The TAC strategy was simple

- Develop a website that helped consumers make informed choices about the safety of the vehicle they were about to purchase; and
- Develop a public education program that urged Victorians to consider safety in their next vehicle purchase.

By encouraging consumer demand for safer cars, the TAC hoped to push manufacturers to develop/import safer cars for the Victorian / Australian market, which in turn consumers would be more amenable to buy

Following a competitive process, a Sydney based agency advertising and multimedia agency, The Moulton, was engaged to develop the vehicle safety website and supporting media campaign.

The howsafeisyourcar.com.au brand, website and public education campaign was born.

### **THE CAMPAIGN**

#### **The Website**

A far more complex task, than originally envisaged. It was necessary to negotiate with three different suppliers of data, the web development team and advertising agency.

The TAC was not a contributor to the ANCAP or the UCSR programs. To gain the support for the howsafeisyourcar.com.au site development, it was agreed that the site would:

- not be branded by the TAC.
- acknowledge all the contributors to these programs
- be available to financial contributors to the ANCAP and UCSR programs free of charge

It was also agreed that contributors to the ANCAP and UCSR programs would have use of the creative material developed to promote the site free of charge.

When launched, the site provided safety ratings for over 80% of the vehicles on Australian roads built post – 1990.

The TAC recognising, that changing demand patterns amongst Victorian car buyers alone would not be sufficient create the demand required to push vehicle manufacturers to provide and promote safer vehicles Victoria accounted for around 27%<sup>7</sup> of new passenger car sales at this time (2002), but vehicles were being manufactured/imported for the entire Australian market. By offering use of the, howsafeisyourcar.com.au website and promotional

materials to other road safety agencies across Australia free of charge, there was a greater chance for consumer demand to increase and for the TAC's strategy to be successful.

Market research drove the look and feel of the site. Black and yellow, as well as the image of crash test dummies were considered to be instantly recognisable as being associated with safety. The brand 'howsafeisyourcar' was chosen from a long list of suggestions, such as 'driveasafecar' and 'buyasafecar' because it offered a challenge to consumers; it was personally relevant and related more to promoting vehicle safety than vehicle purchase.

### **The Mass Media (support) Campaign**

If car buyers were to demand safer vehicles, it was important that the argument for them to do so was compelling. Given safety was not often on car buyers criteria list, maximum persuasion was required to get it there.

A simple, low cost, TV advertisement, showing an ANCAP crash test with a voice-over asking consumers about what was important in buying their next car (colour, imported wheels, cup-holders)? or how it performed in a crash? was developed. Along with radio and press advertisements, outdoor advertising (billboards) and public relations activity the howsafeisyourcar.com.au website and campaign was launched in June 2002.

The campaign was launched with high media purchasing weights and gained good local media coverage. Public relations helped considerably, with manufacturers relatively negative view about the TAC's efforts to promote vehicle safety, creating media interest and helping to keep the public interested. As hoped, thousands of visitors flocked to the site to see the rating of their current car. A common complaint for early visitors to the site was that they couldn't find their car. Usually this was because it was a fairly uncommon, imported vehicle such as an Aston Martin or Lamborghini. The frequently asked questions, section of the site was greatly expanded in the first few weeks of the site going live, with the range of questions being sent through the site helping to refine content and the TAC understand the areas of interest for the Victorian motorist.

Since 2002, the TAC has continuously refined and updated the howsafeisyourcar.com.au site and promoted the site and vehicle safety issues more generally. To December 2010, six TV campaigns and a range of press, radio and outdoor support advertising has been undertaken to promote the site. The later three campaigns (from 2007) have

concentrated on the promotion of specific vehicle safety features – side curtain airbags and electronic stability control systems (subject to another paper at this conference).

On-line advertising, on car sales sites and sponsorship of major events, where interest in vehicle safety is likely to be high eg Melbourne Formula 1 Grand Prix, the Melbourne Motorshow, the Baby and Toddler Expo have also become a major channels for promoting the website and vehicle safety.

### **The Campaign Outcomes**

There are several measures that are used to track the success of the campaign in Victoria. On an annual basis the TAC undertakes an extensive survey of road user's self reported behaviours and attitudes to key road safety issues. The TAC's annual Road Safety Monitor explores those criteria consumers consider the most important when purchasing a new car, e.g. price, safety, make and model. In 2001 when the survey was first conducted, safety was rated as fifth (unprompted) on the list of most important features. In the 2004, safety had been elevated and was rated second behind price. From 2005 – 2010; safety remained as the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> most important criteria in vehicle purchase with fuel economy entering the picture as 2<sup>nd</sup> during the recent economic downturn. Awareness that information about vehicle safety exists has increased slightly, and awareness of the HSIYC website (unprompted) has increased from 1% (2002) to 10% (2009) and prompted from 25% in 2004 to 47% in 2009.

Whilst a shift in consumer attitude and awareness of safety has shifted positively, a shift in the average safety of new vehicles sold in Australia has also been observed. From 2001 to 2009 a 38 per cent increase in the average points awarded in vehicle crash testing was observed (i.e., from 21.2 to 29.4.). The average star rating over this time period has increased from 3.5 stars to 4.5 stars.

Visits to the site have steadily increased over the years with between 15, 000 and 35,000 unique visits to the site now being achieved per month. Peaks of around 35,000 occur during heavy advertising periods and during events such as the Melbourne Formula 1 Grand Prix. Given other Australian jurisdictions (Tasmania and Northern Territory and very recently Queensland) link and or promote the site; it is difficult to ascertain exact Victorian visitation.

Vehicle manufacturers are now more interested in marketing vehicle on their safety performance with most now promoting the ANCAP (star) rating for their vehicles. The press is now far more interested

in vehicle safety, motoring journalists commonly report if vehicles don't achieve a good star rating in crash testing and ANCAP ratings are commonly supplied as part of car reviews and on car sale sites eg carsales.com.au<sup>8</sup> and the media is very interested when new cars perform badly in crash tests.

Most importantly, road trauma has continued to reduce substantially, with Victoria recording its lowest road toll on record in 2010 with 287 people killed, down from 397 in 2002 when the howsafeisyourcar.com.au site and campaign was launched. While this result was the outcome of a range of aggressive road safety initiatives, there is no doubt that, the Victorian passenger vehicle fleet is far safer than it was a decade ago, that Victorian consumers are more aware of vehicle safety in terms of their purchasing decisions.

### **CONCLUSION**

The TAC set out to put vehicle safety on the map in Victoria, Australia. Developing a high quality website, it promoted the site and vehicle safety more generally through a mass media campaign. The TAC considers the howsafeisyourcar.com.au campaign to have successfully achieved its aims with Victorian car buyers now far more aware of vehicle safety issues and the safety performance of new vehicles is far greater than they were when the program launched in 2002.

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