WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED TO DATE?

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Walter Cutter, an experienced traffic engineer, began his remarks at a traffic safety research symposium with "I wish I were giving this talk thirty years ago—when I knew all the answers."

That remark strikes a responsive chord because, after more than 40 years in the field of driver licensing, I can recall times when I too knew all the answers. However, the more I have learned about the complexities of our problems, the more clearly I can recognize what Cutter described in his case as "the dimensions of my ignorance about it."

In considering the future role of driver licensing, perhaps we should ask ourselves whether we are considering the role of driver licensing as it probably will be if it continues at its present rate of public acceptance or as we believe it should be if developed to its full potential as a major contributor to traffic safety. If we are thinking in terms of the latter we might as well say at the outset that the role of driver licensing as it should be under ideal conditions has been known for many years, and it has not changed. The concept is basically simple.

Perhaps I should briefly review this basic concept and possibly draw out a few of the obstacles that we have encountered in trying to develop it. This is important because the same obstacles exist today, and as long as they remain we will only continue a form of colorful but ineffective shadowboxing with the problem.

All will agree that all drivers must be licensed and that this is basic to an effective licensing program. At the same time, no one is so naive in traffic matters as to believe that all drivers are licensed now. On the basis of state reports, spot checks, and special surveys, it has been estimated that on any given day there are at least 10 million unlicensed drivers on the road. Although many drivers are simply careless about keeping a valid license, there are also many who cannot qualify for a license and many whose licenses have been suspended or revoked for bad performance.

A recent report from one state estimated that there were 400,000 unlicensed drivers in that state and revealed that 9.6 percent of drivers involved in fatal accidents were unlicensed at the time of the accident.

Regardless of the type of licensing program under consideration, can it truly be effective under such circumstances? Certainly not. That is one of the practical problems we have faced for years, and it is still with us. Ignoring it will not make it disappear. That has been tried.

The second basic requirement of an effective program is that licenses be issued only to those who are qualified to safely operate vehicles of a type they intend to drive. For this the uninitiated might have

a quick and easy answer: Make the qualifying tests more severe, make them more exacting, make them more meaningful, and on and on.

State after state has eliminated the simple parallel parking or skill test that was at one time a common road-test requirement. Why? The public regards this simple maneuver as unreasonable and unduly severe. In fact, in one state the legislature has enacted a law with the following provision: "provided, however, that persons 60 years of age and over, when being examined as herein provided, shall not be required to parallel park a motor vehicle as part of any such examination." One can only assume in this case that too many legislators were 60 years old and over.

This public unwillingness to accept more meaningful tests is another problem that is still with us, and, as in the first case, we cannot continue to ignore it with hopes that it will disappear.

Next, an effective licensing program is one that suspends the licenses of those drivers who perform poorly after being licensed; further, those who lose their driving privileges for lawful and legitimate reasons would stop driving until their driving privileges were restored. This is not what happens very often. It is only what we like to believe.

So far this discussion has been discouraging and possibly negative, but I am only trying to point out a few of the real-world situations confronting those who work on the "front lines" of driver licensing.

In all honesty, I believe that truly effective driver licensing is not a salable product. This has long puzzled me, and it still does.

I would like to briefly characterize an ideal program of driver control through licensing procedures—Utopia. Such a program could ensure that every driver we meet or pass in traffic is a licensed driver and that as a licensed driver he could be depended on to do the right thing in any traffic situation. If he were not a driver of that type he would not have a license, and without a license he would not be on the road.

Now it is clear why I refer to this concept as Utopian, but one question remains: Are there valid reasons why it should not be, essentially at least, as I describe it? If so, what are those reasons? Personally, I list as number one public apathy, indifference, even opposition.

This will continue until the driving public recognizes, possibly from a purely selfish viewpoint, the major contribution such a program would make to personal safety.

It is a "selling" job, and it is a tremendous one. Until it is done, even the best of programs that we can develop on paper will stay right there—on paper. As you know, a primary requirement of good salesmanship is faith in the product. Do we really believe we have or can develop a good product? Are we honestly convinced that our prospective customers, the driving public in this case, would benefit by "buying" the product we offer?

If our answers to these questions are negative, we are in the wrong business.

In the traffic safety field, increasing attention is being directed toward the driver and what can be done to improve his performance. John Volpe, former Secretary of Transportation, said, "The time has come when the right to survive must supersede the right to drive." Officials in both public and private organizations have expressed similar viewpoints, but this leaves us with our original question, How do we "sell" the product?

I sometimes wonder whether the public attitude toward driver licensing is not primarily one of tolerance rather than appreciation. Understanding is limited to a general impression that one is supposed to carry a license and to have that license renewed every 2, 3, or 4 years. Of course, such a license is recognized and appreciated as a convenient identification card—useful in cashing checks—but beyond that its stature is quite insignificant.

A book written for law enforcement officials (1) points out that "In a democracy, support of the people cannot be forced. It must be won." Perhaps we have overlooked this far too long in the licensing of drivers.

We cannot hope to advance the cause of better driver licensing until the public realizes that effective driver control can do something for them, something that is constructive and definitely beneficial.

If we and the agencies we represent can help to develop such understanding, if we can advance publicly and among officials a concept that possession of a license to drive entails a responsibility—a very real and enforceable responsibility—to perform well in traffic, then we will have done much toward constructively determining the future role of driver licensing in highway safety.

REFERENCE

1. Payton, G. T. Patrol Procedure. Legal Book Corp., 1971.

Discussion

Frederick E. Vanosdall, Michigan State University

From his extensive experience in driver licensing, Kerrick stresses how driver licensing improvements are possible if available knowledge and experience are used. Although the concept of licensing is simple—only those qualified to safely operate vehicles should—he points out that (a) possibly 10 million unlicensed drivers are using the roads (nearly 5 percent of the nation's driving population); (b) state legislatures have eliminated driving test requirements that the public regards as severe; (c) public support of meaningful tests is not evident; and (d) license suspension does not deter drivers from driving.

Kerrick suggests that the mission of driver licensing is not understood by the public and that there must be a well-designed and continuous program to gain public attention, interest, and support—a selling job—to inform the public of the positive features of driver licensing. Kerrick's facts suggest that much improvement is possible through programs that increase the value of a driver's license.

To measure the quality or sales appeal of driver licensing, Kerrick suggests that a more careful review of two major issues is needed: First, what are the consequences of licensing drivers whose abilities to respond to real-world traffic problems are unknown? Second, how can new and current state laws bring about changes to require personal appearance for license renewal, which would afford licensing authorities ample opportunity to favorably impress large numbers of drivers with the quality of driving performance needed to survive in future traffic problems? (The energy crisis offers an opportunity to propose ways to improve driving performance and conserve gasoline.)

The future of driver licensing as a safety device seems dependent on administrators who are cognizant of past and current problems and who will implement existing know-how to regain public confidence and respect in driver licensing as a service benefiting them.