

Abridgment

A Community Campaign That Increased Helmet Use Among Bicyclists

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A community campaign was conducted to increase the use of helmets among bicyclists in Madison, Wisconsin. Helmets were promoted through the mass media by means of news releases, public service announcements, and advertising. Brochures and posters were distributed through schools, bicycle dealers, health and fitness centers, and other outlets to supplement interpersonal communication channels. Helmet prices were reduced, and rebates and prizes were provided as incentives to purchase and wear helmets. About one-half of the bicyclists interviewed in a random-sample survey after the campaign recalled exposure to helmet-related messages. The sales of helmets increased nearly 100 percent. Field counts showed that helmet use increased significantly from 15.0 percent before the campaign to 19.2 percent after.

The increased popularity of bicycling has been accompanied by an increase in bicycle accidents, injuries, and fatalities (1). Head injuries are perhaps the most serious consequence of bicycle accidents. Head injuries are responsible for 75 percent of all bicycle-related fatalities not involving motor vehicles (2). In bicycle-related fatalities involving motor vehicles, 86 percent of the fatally injured bicyclists received their most serious injury in the head or neck region (3).

A coalition of Madison health care providers, bicycle organizations, and city and state government agencies conducted a bicycle helmet promotion campaign in May 1986. The two campaign objectives were to reach a significant proportion of Madison bicyclists and to achieve a significant increase in the use of helmets among them.

METHODS

Preparation

There is little basis for an estimate of the number of Madison bicyclists. However, because there are about 150,000 bicycles (4) in a city of 170,000 (5), it was assumed that all but the very young, the very old, and the disabled bicycle. Local bicycle accident data suggest that those who bicycle most are young adults (6).

To better define the campaign audience, local bicycle dealers and leaders of local bicycle organizations were consulted. They suggested that most Madison bicyclists probably thought about purchasing a helmet, but decided, in most cases, that one was not necessary. Among those bicyclists who thought that they

might need a helmet but decided not to buy one, the local experts suggested that there were economic, fashion, or comfort constraints that precluded purchase. It was believed that there were relatively few bicyclists who had not thought about getting a helmet, and fewer still who had some idiosyncratic reason for not owning one.

The audience analysis suggested that the campaign try to convince bicyclists who think that they do not need a helmet that they do need such protection. It also suggested addressing the perceived economic constraint by either reducing the cost of helmets or persuading bicyclists that helmets are worth the monetary outlay, or both. The analysis further indicated that the campaign should present a positive fashion image for helmets and minimize the perception that helmets are uncomfortable.

A survey was conducted before the campaign to learn more about Madison bicyclists, to find out why some wear helmets and most do not, and to discern whether there were any demographic or other differences between those who wear helmets and those who do not. A local market research firm conducted telephone interviews with approximately 300 adult bicyclists. The sample was randomly selected from residential telephone numbers listed in the Madison-area telephone directory. Respondents were alternately screened for men and women bicyclists. The interviews were conducted with the adult in the household who bicycled the most, but at least once in 1985. The survey was conducted April 4–14, 1986. Selected results are analyzed in the Results section.

Implementation

The campaign incorporated mass and interpersonal communications and incentives with the major thrust channeled through mass media. The design emphasized maximizing audience exposure to campaign messages intended to persuade bicyclists to buy and wear helmets.

A bicycle helmet theme was established for Madison Bike Month (May). The theme served as the primary campaign message—a front-runner that allowed arguments for wearing helmets to follow.

It was decided that the theme need not specifically express the need for helmets or address the arguments against them. It was thought more important to have a positive, creative theme to gain audience attention, and then, once that attention was gained, to follow with arguments for wearing a helmet and counterarguments to the reasons for not wearing one.

The theme selected was Be a Well-Dressed Cyclist—Wear a Helmet. It was accompanied by materials showing bicyclists in

formal attire and, of course, helmets. The seeming incongruity of formal wear, bicycles, and helmets was deemed likely to attract media and public attention. In addition, the tuxedo-helmet combination suggested that no matter how one is dressed or how one bicycles, a helmet is standard bicycling equipment.

The theme was followed with information on why helmets should be considered standard equipment and why cost, minor discomfort, and appearance should be of little concern. Whenever possible, the need for helmets was illustrated by accident data. The argument that helmets were too costly was countered with a reminder that they are low-cost insurance against pain, inconvenience, medical expenses, and loss of one's life. It was also mentioned that the cost of helmets represented little expense to ensure the security of loved ones. In addition, it was noted that there are many new kinds of helmets available and that the latest technology has made them cooler, more comfortable, and, for the fashion-conscious, more stylish.

These messages were emphasized in media contacts, particularly in interviews. They were also provided to interpersonal interaction leaders for their use in discussing helmets with bicyclists.

Madison's mayor launched the campaign at a May 1 news conference. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation Office for Highway Safety released two television public service announcements, one targeted at young adults, the other targeted at parents. The helmet campaign theme was included in a Madison Bike Month news release, in a bicycle column in the local cultural weekly, and in feature articles published in organizational newsletters. Some bicycle dealers advertised helmets during May. Helmet use was discussed during radio and television talk shows. Bicycle clubs made presentations on helmets before their rides.

The state Office for Highway Safety also published a brochure on bicycle helmets, using the campaign theme. The front cover illustration, a cartoon sketch of a helmeted couple in formal wear riding a tandem, and the theme were used for a poster distributed with the brochure. The posters and brochures were distributed by bicycle dealers, health care providers, police departments, and school officials.

A local bicycle touring club conducted a rebate program providing a \$5 reimbursement to the first 100 persons who submitted proof of helmet purchase during the campaign. Another bicycle organization gave merchant-donated gift certificates to bicyclists who sent in pledges that they always wear a helmet when riding. Bicycle dealers offered special discounts on helmets.

RESULTS

Precampaign Survey

The precampaign survey sampled 305 bicyclists, 153 of whom were men and 152 women. Their ages ranged from 18 to 78 years, with the median at 28 years.

Although 19 percent of the respondents reported owning a helmet, only 12 percent said that they usually wore it. Of those who did not own helmets, 32 percent said that they never thought about it and 35 percent said that they did not need one. Only 10 percent said that helmets were too expensive, whereas

13 percent said that they were too hot. About 5 percent said that helmets were unattractive and less than 5 percent offered other reasons.

Although the local bicycle experts correctly identified the reasons that bicyclists cite for not wearing helmets, they underestimated the lack of awareness and greatly overestimated the significance of cost, comfort, and fashion. More than two-thirds of the respondents needed to be made aware of the need for helmets.

Bicyclists with higher education were significantly more likely to report that they wore helmets, but there was no significant association between helmet use and income or employment classification. The results also indicated that men and those who bike year-round are significantly more likely to wear helmets.

The respondents were also asked where they were most likely to obtain bicycling safety information. Newspapers were cited by 35 percent of the bicyclists; 18 percent said that television was their most likely source. Magazines were cited by 13 percent and bike shops by 12 percent. Radio and friends were each considered most likely sources by 7 percent; the remaining 7 percent noted other sources.

Postcampaign Survey

To estimate the level of exposure and awareness generated by the campaign, a telephone survey of bicyclists was conducted June 10–12. The precampaign sampling method was used again. The respondents were asked whether they recalled having read, seen, or heard anything about bicycle helmets in the previous 6 weeks. Those who had were asked to describe what they recalled.

Of the 68 respondents, 32 (47 percent) recalled reading, seeing, or hearing something about bicycle helmets in the previous 6 weeks. Of the 32, more than one-third remembered seeing something in a newspaper. About one-fifth cited an unspecified advertisement and one-fifth recalled seeing one of the television public service announcements produced for the campaign. Bike shops, word of mouth, and a brochure brought home from school by respondents' children were each mentioned more than once.

These results are very similar to the responses to the precampaign survey question about where bicyclists were most likely to obtain bicycling safety information: newspapers and television figure strongly in both surveys.

Bicycle Dealers

The 10 bicycle dealers who agreed to participate in the campaign were interviewed July 1–7. One dealer reported no change in helmet sales, whereas six estimated that sales increased 15 percent to 200 percent over their sales in May 1985. Three would not provide an estimate. The mean increase in sales among the six dealers who provided estimates was 92 percent.

Field Observations

To determine whether the campaign had an effect on behavior, pre- and postcampaign field observations were conducted. The

observations involved counting the number of bicyclists who passed through four intersections and the number of those who were wearing helmets.

The precampaign field observations were conducted April 22–29. Of the 1,297 bicyclists observed, 194 (15.0 percent) were wearing helmets. The postcampaign field observations were conducted June 2–16. Of the 1,341 bicyclists observed, 247 (19.2 percent) were wearing helmets. The increase of 4.2 percent from the precampaign to the postcampaign observations is statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

The variety of quantitative and qualitative measures taken to evaluate this campaign indicates that the campaign was a success, and the sum of them makes that conclusion more certain. Without a doubt, the campaign objectives were attained: a significant proportion of Madison bicyclists was reached and there was a significant increase in the use of helmets among Madison bicyclists. The 4-week campaign reached perhaps 50,000 bicyclists and prompted roughly 5,000 to start wearing helmets.

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