

Scared Safe

Imagine you're watching television and during the commercial break a public service announcement attempts to persuade viewers to use vehicle safety belts. A teenaged girl is shown sitting in a rocking chair looking out a window. She says, "I'm not sick or anything. I could go out more but since the car crash, I just don't . . . the crash wasn't dad's fault. I go for walks with my father after dark . . . that way I don't get, you know, stared at."

The girl turns enough to reveal a large ugly scar on her face, which was previously hidden from view. She continues, "It doesn't hurt anymore." Then an announcer says off-camera, "Car crashes kill two ways: right away and then little by little. Wear your safety belts and live!"

What does your common sense tell you about the impact of this kind of message – one that tries to scare people into being safe? Should we be using fear-arousing messages to increase safety-related behaviors? Do fear tactics work?

A Classic Field Study

Some common sense tells us fear appeals are no good. The anxiety or emotional reaction from a scary message may interfere with a person's attention and retention. Or, people might merely deny or repress the fear in order to maintain their comfort level. This is probably the common sense of many safety professionals, because results of research which evaluated the effects of scare tactics to get people to buckle up failed.

The basic approach was to present verbal messages and pictures to warn audiences that any inconvenience or discomfort is minor compared to the disability or

disfigurement resulting from a vehicle crash. The opening scenario, for example, was used in the best known behavior-based evaluation of public service announcements presented on television. The large-scale study was conducted in the early 1970's by Leon Robertson and colleagues.

Six different safety belt messages, four using a scare tactic like the one exemplified above, were shown during the day and during prime time on one cable of a dual cable TV system. The 6,400 homes in Cable System A received the safety-belt messages 943 times over a nine-month period. This amounted to an average exposure of two to three presentations per person every week. The 7,400 homes on Cable System B were in the control condition, and received no public service announcement about safety belts.

The impact of the safety message was evaluated by daily field observations of safety-belt use at fourteen different community sites, for one month before and throughout the nine months of the campaign. Vehicle license plate numbers were recorded and later matched with each owner's name and address from the files of the state department of motor vehicles. The TV viewers did not know they were in an experiment, and the field observers could not know the group assignment of their vehicle observations. As such, this represents one of the most rigorous large-scale behavioral tests of a media safety message.

The results were disappointing. Overall, mean safety-belt use among male and female drivers was 8.4% and 11.3% (respectively) for the treatment group, and 8.2% and 10.3%, respectively, for the no treatment control group. These findings were

published in the *American Journal of Public Health* (in 1974) with the authors' conclusion "that television campaigns do not have any effect on use of safety belts."

A prime reason given by transportation officials and communication researchers was that four of the six different TV spots were based on a scare tactic. It was assumed that the fear emotion interfered with attention or learning, or simply caused denial. This conclusion and interpretation spread throughout the safety community and contributed to a common belief that scare tactics aren't effective for safety campaigns.

What About More Recent Research?

The results of follow-up research on the impact of fear appeals require a change in this "common sense." A recent meta-analysis of 98 different studies of fear appeals show quite conclusively that scare tactics work well *when* they also include efficacy messages. This conclusion relates directly to my *IHSN* article last month on self-efficacy and response-efficacy. Let me explain.

Self vs. Response Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief that he or she can perform a certain procedure or technique. It reflects self-confidence and a "can do" attitude. In contrast, response-efficacy refers to one's belief that a particular procedure or technique will actually produce a desired outcome. Thus, people with both self- and response-efficacy believe they can perform a certain task that will lead to desired results.

Motivation to perform the task comes from the third type of belief – outcome expectancy. This is the belief that the results expected from completing the task are worthwhile. In other words, will the consequences justify the effort?

The Successful Scare Tactic

Let's relate this three-way belief analysis to the design of an effective fear appeal. First, a realistic scare tactic tells an audience they need to do something to avoid a negative consequence. That's the motivation component reflected in an outcome expectancy. But to be effective, the message must do more than scare. It must demonstrate a straightforward behavioral strategy for avoiding the negative consequence (response efficacy), and present the safety countermeasure in a way that convinces the audience they can apply it successfully (self-efficacy). Research has shown quite convincingly that this kind of fear appeal will produce the most beneficial behavior change.

Keep in mind, however, the conclusion from the rigorous risk perception research of Paul Slovic, Peter Sandman, and colleagues. Collective statistics don't scare us nearly as much as an individual case study (as I discussed much earlier in an August 1994 *ISHN* article on risk perception). That's why it's so important to cultivate the kind of corporate culture in which employees willingly discuss their injuries and "near misses" with work groups.

But, these testimonies must do more than convince people there's a risk in their work space. They must do more than arouse fear or anxiety. To be effective at motivating desirable behavior, they must offer convincing strategies for avoiding the injury and assure audiences they have the time, skills, and tools to apply the injury-prevention procedure. In this way, the scare tactic motivates people to avoid the aroused fear by acting constructively in ways that truly contribute to injury prevention.

So What's Wrong With the Opening Scare Tactic?

The astute reader will note several aspects of the opening scenario that should have made it effective. It displayed an individual case in a way that typically provokes outcome expectancy. In other words, most viewers can relate to the teenager and the aversive consequences she is experiencing. Furthermore, using a vehicle safety belt is easy, so self-efficacy should be implied as a way to avoid the negative outcome. And surely a viewer could see that safety-belt use would have prevented the girl's face from smashing into the windshield. Thus, response efficacy was implicated.

So where's the problem? Why didn't this and similar scare tactics work in 1974 to increase safety-belt use? One can only speculate, of course, and there are a number of possibilities. It's my guess that the year was a critical factor. In fact, I think a scare tactic like the one opening this article would work today.

Readers who were driving in 1974 realize a few key differences between then and now that likely hindered response efficacy in the 1970's. First, vehicles in those days frequently had only lap belts, which do not hold heads back from slamming into windshields. More importantly, it was once common to hear of individuals whose lives were saved because they were NOT buckled up. "Uncle Joe was thrown clear of the crash and therefore did not burn in the fire." "Luckily, Aunt Mary was unbuckled and thus able to escape from her sinking vehicle."

Note also that the use of vehicle safety belts was very low in the 1970's. While today it's natural to see people buckled up, in those days safety-belt use was the exception not the rule. Thus, it's likely the opening scenario would have benefited from showing people buckled up. However, the T.V. actors in those days buckled up even

less than the general public. Back then it was a different culture with regard to vehicle safety belts.

Bottom line: It's difficult to scare people into performing a certain behavior when it's easy to see that most everyone else is not practicing the desired response.

In Conclusion

Perhaps the title of this article reminded some readers of a program designed to reduce juvenile delinquency, called "Scared Straight." For this intervention, teenagers who have broken the law spend the day in a prison where they encounter a number of tough, "in-your-face" inmates. These inmates give the juveniles a taste of prison reality in an attempt to "scare them straight."

The results of this program have been mixed. Most teenagers are alarmed and horrified by their prison experience. But, when they return to their neighborhoods and peer groups, many (if not most) continue their destructive and/or illegal behavior patterns. Why? You know the answer.

Those who failed to change didn't receive strategies (response efficacy) they believed they could actually perform effectively (self-efficacy) in order to avoid the negative consequences they were scared into wanting to avoid. Thus, the "scared straight" tactic usually only influences one of the three beliefs needed to affect beneficial behavior change.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor, Virginia Tech
Senior Partner,
Safety Performance Solutions

Note: Dr. Geller is a Senior Partner with Safety Performance Solutions, a leading training and consulting firm that helps companies worldwide develop employee self-efficacy and response-efficacy for injury prevention. For more information

call (540) 951-7233; e-mail safety@safetyperformance.com, or visit
www.safetyperformance.com