

Toward Target Zero

Can qualitative research save lives?

Why don't people wear seat belts? The South Carolina Department of Public Safety needed to know the answer. Only then could they develop campaigns to target the emotions that stop people from buckling up.

This is how we helped them figure it out....

We are all horrified when we see or hear of serious accidents on the road. But what makes it worse is knowing that many injuries and deaths are preventable. South Carolina, like many states, pays a heavy price. Every hour, at least one person dies in this country because he or she didn't buckle up.

Greater use of safety belts also brings a fiscal benefit to South Carolina: federal highway dollars are tied to seat belt usage. The US Department of Transportation target is for 90% of drivers to wear seat belts. In South Carolina, compliance was at 72.5%.

The Logic is Clear, But Not Everyone Operates Logically

There are lots of compelling logical reasons why drivers should wear seat belts:

- You are more likely to die or be injured without one.
- It's the law.
- You'll get a ticket and have to pay a fine.
- Your insurance premiums will go up.

These alone should make seat belts a no-brainer. The problem is, it doesn't.

Seat Belt Use Unchanged Despite Tougher Measures

South Carolina's rate has hovered between 69-73% since 2001.

The stability of these numbers is striking, especially in light of:

- **Tougher laws:** Since 2005, police can stop drivers without seat belts – even if they are driving safely in other respects.
- **High-visibility public awareness campaigns:** Buckle Up South Carolina is coordinated with National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and follows national best practices.
- **Stepped-up enforcement.**

There is clearly a hard-core group of drivers who have not been moved, despite the state's best efforts.

What would change the mindset of these individuals?



"I had a bad car wreck and lost my spleen. I was not wearing a seat belt. But obviously, this did not stop me. If that didn't make me wear a seat belt, I don't know what will."

Research Participant,
49 years old, Greenville SC

Case Notes:



South Carolina Department of Public Safety, Office of Highway Safety exists to ensure the safety of South Carolina's citizens and visitors.

The “Why Behind the Why” for Not Wearing Seat Belts

To answer that, South Carolina needed a much deeper look. That meant getting beyond the sterile surveys and polls that had long been available. The obvious reasons were well-known: “They’re uncomfortable” or “I was only going down around the corner.”

True motivations can be elusive. Especially when people do the exact opposite of what common sense or logic would dictate.

Apter International specializes in issues of this nature. We get beyond the surface excuses and unmask the underlying emotions -- **the why behind the why.**

What We Did

The Department of Public Safety heard of our work with the FBI and the Human Rights Campaign. They thought we could bring fresh insight to their problem. Working with them and their advertising agency, we embarked on a ground-breaking plan of research.

The plan had three phases, based on **Reversal Theory** (see box):

- ❶ **Psychological Probes:** In-depth, 1-on-1 interviews lasting 60-90 minutes. Techniques delve ever-deeper for richer, more meaningful responses from drivers.
- ❷ **Thematic Analysis:** Interviews are decoded to reveal the essential emotional themes. Because people are changeable, their inconsistencies and inner contradictions are unraveled.
- ❸ **Strategic Choices:** Clients are given clear options and recommendations for how to make the biggest impact.

The Insights

The results were both shocking and revealing. We identified 13 themes, of which no less than 9 “justified” not wearing seat belts. Here are a few of the most compelling:

- **Rebelliousness and anger:** Seat belt laws were seen as taking away personal freedom. Authorities who enforce them are regarded as tyrannical and resented. Therefore, seat belt laws should be defied as a matter of principle.
- **Arrogance:** Many drivers felt they will not have an accident because they’re such good drivers. Accidents happen to other people. They feel almost invulnerable. As a result, seat belts are unnecessary.
- **Irrational fear of being trapped:** Some felt safer without a seat belt because they could escape in case of an accident. As one driver said, “I’d rather take my chances going through the windshield than suffer a horrible death by drowning or being burnt alive.” The evidence proves this is not true, yet some drivers refuse to believe it, even when shown the data.

Reversal Theory

A powerful theory of motivation, which provides a framework for understanding individual and group behavior patterns.

Developed by Dr. Michael Apter in the 1970’s, it is based on four pairs of alternating motivational states:



This approach recognizes and focuses on the paradoxes of human behavior. It has been validated by over 400 scientific studies and is the subject of 20 books.

For more information about RT see contact details on last page.

- **Concern for others:** One of the strongest drivers of compliance is the desire to show children the right way to behave, or thinking of those left behind if the driver is injured or killed.

Springboard for More Powerful Messages

Our research also highlighted why previous campaigns may not have been as effective they could have been. Not only did previous campaigns fail to pick up on the really important emotional themes, but often the tone was confrontational. This was counterproductive as it provoked more rebelliousness and people dig in their heels. Not the ideal scenario for getting folks to follow the law.

ASA is now developing future public service campaigns that integrate television, print and campaigns with community outreach programs. Says Peter Wertimer, Chairman and CEO of ASA:

"We will use the data to move on to new solutions to the problems of persuading our most recalcitrant drivers to buckle up."

Sharing Insights, Monitoring Real-Life Outcomes

South Carolina has judged that the research is so important that it needs to be disseminated nationally, so others can benefit.

We have been invited to present the findings at a conference hosted they're hosting in September 2007. The theme is "Striving Together toward Target Zero," because one traffic fatality is too many. It will bring together everyone who touches highway safety and arm them with tools and inspiration to reduce traffic fatalities significantly.

Plans are also in place to continue monitoring actual seat belt use through street-corner observation. While it may take a while to have an impact on real behavior, won't that be a day to celebrate?

"I'd like to congratulate you for your work on behalf of SC DPS. They are hailing the findings as breakthrough stuff."

Peter Wertimer
Chairman, CEO
Advertising Service Agency

If 90 percent of drivers buckled up, 5,536 deaths and 132,700 injuries would be prevented each year.

US Department of
Transportation

Apter International is a research-based consultancy that discovers the "why behind the why." Specific application areas are:

- Organizational and Leadership Development
- Consumer and Social Advocacy Research
- Profiling and Survey Products

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