

**THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE ON ROAD SAFETY MET
AT NSW PARLIAMENT HOUSE, MACQUARIE STREET, SYDNEY, ON MONDAY
2 FEBRUARY 2009.**

DISCUSSION WITH Mr JOHN BEVINS, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, JOHN BEVINS PTY LTD.

CHAIR (Mr Wing) - Mr Bevins, I extend a very warm welcome and our appreciation to you for giving us your time at short notice.

Mr BEVINS - I have been involved with road safety advertising since 1982, when I started the agency. I am still involved; the RTA is one of our major accounts. We began by doing the launch of the random breath testing campaign in New South Wales back in 1982. Now we handle driver fatigue for the RTA and other projects as they come up. The most recent work involved a campaign targeting young drivers in the country, young male drivers in an antispeeding campaign. Also we had an antidrink-drive campaign that began in the country but was so successful it was extended to the city. I do not know if you would have seen the commercials but the antispeeding campaign in effect is a parody of a new car commercial, which does what a lot of car advertising does and that is to glorify speed. It gives the impression that you are watching a commercial for a new ute - it could be a Holden or a Ford; it was a hybrid for the purposes of the commercial. The viewer is carried along with the euphoria of driving at speed and then surprise, surprise, it turns out to be a commercial for road safety. The young man who is driving alone in the car and enjoying the experience, loses control and crashes into an oncoming car. Interestingly, the actual impact is quite horrific but it is not morbid in the sense of seeing the result of what happened.

When we researched this commercial amongst groups of young men they were able to feel the sense of responsibility that they would feel were they to kill another innocent person. In that case they saw that the driver of the other car was a woman. Now, you only see for a split second, for a few frames, the dummy that we had in the oncoming car, because the whole was shot with a rig. It is hard for the casual viewer to notice that it was a dummy with a long wig on, which suggested it was a woman. But the young men were able to see that and the sense of anguish and guilt that they were able to project was quite profound. I suppose that is a good reminder that most young people are responsible and, whereas they have a real sense of immortality themselves, they can quite easily see that their actions on the road could result in somebody else being killed.

Ms FORREST - Can I clarify, John; in that ad were there any really graphic broken bodies?

Mr BEVINS - No.

Ms FORREST - My perception is that you can show damaged bodies and not just the grieving family side of it but the injuries, the blood and that sort of thing and that will have an impact because a lot of people don't like the sight of blood, but does that make people switch off more than if they imagine what would have happened? Do you have a view on that?

Mr BEVINS - I have a view. I believe it does. This commercial had an emotional consequence for the young driver himself and so it was quite confronting to see his sense of anger after the crash when he was alone among the wreckage. My view on showing blood and guts, as they say, is that it can be seen as emotional blackmail and it can easily be a turn-off to the degree that you switch off, you avert your eyes. I think it has a limited place but a constant barrage of blood and guts in terms of road safety can be very counter-productive. I think there is a risk that it normalises for society and says that society is willing to accept this toll.

Ms FORREST - Do you think it is better to leave it to the person's imagination rather than show them too much?

Mr BEVINS - I think it is, but I don't know whether they would even imagine the consequences of what happens. The thing that we believe very strongly as an advertising agency is that you cannot change attitudes with advertising. Many advertising briefs say we want to change attitudes. The goal of advertising is to change behaviour by working with existing attitudes and I think it is really important to get to understand what the existing attitudes are of the target audience you are dealing with and use those attitudes to bring about a behavioural change.

Ms FORREST - Do you mean rather than changing them you are changing their behaviour?

Mr BEVINS - We want to change their behaviour but it is very difficult to change their attitudes.

We learned this in 1982, as I said, when we started the agency and one of this first campaigns we did was an anti-drink-drive campaign that ran in Wollongong in mid-1982 and was pioneered by the Australian Medical Association. It was an experimental campaign. As a result of that work, it was written up in the *Medical Journal of Australia* so it was properly evaluated. It produced a result in terms of getting young men of Wollongong to consider moderating their drinking if they were driving. That was back in the bad old days when it was quite acceptable to drink and drive; we all did it. It was before random breath testing had been introduced.

As a result of that work we were called in to meet with the Minister for Transport, the late Peter Cox, and at very short notice we did the advertising campaign to launch random breath testing. The result of that showed that behaviour was changed very dramatically in 1982 because random breath testing was an intervention that forced behavioural change. You had no choice and the focus of the advertising campaign was how will you go when you sit for the test; will you be under 0.05 or under arrest?

The advertising conformed to the formula that I think drives random breath testing which is it is all about deterrence; that is exactly what random breath testing is about. But deterrence equals perceived risk times penalty and if you can maximise both the perceived risk and the penalty then the deterrence factor will be much larger. If the perceived risk is seen to be zero but the penalty is seen to be life imprisonment, the deterrence is zero because zero times no matter how big a penalty equals zero and vice versa with the perceived risk. That campaign maximised both.

Back to my earlier point about the folly of trying to change attitudes. Attitudes can be changed but they are changed by intervention and, interestingly, that program did change attitudes. The advertising worked with existing attitudes - 'I don't want to get arrested and treated like a criminal' - but the program changed behaviour and several months after the behaviour had changed, we saw a dramatic change in attitude. The attitude towards drink-driving, which 90 per cent of women opposed but only 50 per cent of males opposed, gradually grew in terms of its opposition because people changed their behaviour and we all need, psychologically, to bring our attitudes in line with our behaviour. If there is a forced behavioural change via intervention then you can see an attitude change.

CHAIR - Have you had any involvement with preparing material to provide information with a view to encouraging the right attitudes in young people, particularly learner drivers, or have you been solely concerned with the mass community?

Mr BEVINS - No, we have recently done a campaign for P-platers because, as I think you are probably aware, in New South Wales there has been a terrible toll amongst P-platers. That was a fairly brief campaign so we do not have any results for that.

CHAIR - What do you think of the idea of learner drivers, irrespective of age and most of whom would be young, being required to attend some information sessions and given information that may be helpful in enhancing their driving skills and, particularly developing the right attitude to driving.

Mr BEVINS - I think that would potentially be productive. I am not an expert in this area, but I am interested in the point of view about defensive driving that says that in young people it can increase the level of confidence to a dangerous level. Interestingly, the very tragic case in northern New South Wales where the young man in the last few days was sentenced to two years' jail for killing three of his mates, I read in the newspaper, and you cannot believe everything you read in the newspaper, that he had done a defensive driving course and was a non-drinker, as I understand it. I would look carefully at the way that program is set up but I think it is a much needed thing. I think licences are handed out too easily to young people.

Ms FORREST - Going back to the point you made about the perceived risk and the penalties with the licence, for example, a lot of States are changing their graduated licensing systems and making it a little more difficult to get an unrestricted licence. I think it is relatively cheap whereas in some countries, I have heard, it costs up to \$7 000 to get a licence, so they are highly valued. I am not suggesting this because it make it very difficult for a lot of people to achieve that, but is that something that you think should be considered, increasing the value of it as well as the difficulty to achieve it?

Mr BEVINS - Definitely. I think the value of it, whether it is the monetary value of it or what you have to do in order to earn it, is very important.

Ms FORREST - Would you get it back if you lose it, do you think that -

Mr BEVINS - Yes I do. It should be a privilege. It is seen as a right, I think, at the moment and it should be seen as a privilege. An interesting thing is that the road toll has dropped for many, many reasons over the years, not least of all because roads have got better and

cars have got so much better. But there has not been any real modification of young drivers' behaviour. Learner drivers who get their licence today are like I was when I got my licence. Every time I see somebody doing something silly on the road I just have to remind myself of the stupid things that I did and how by the grace of God I am still here. I could easily have hit a telegraph pole or something when my car spun out on a wet road as it did. It would be really interesting to see the same effort put into the drivers as has gone into creating much safer cars.

Ms FORREST - Young men, we know, predominantly do feature more highly in these areas and you cannot take the testosterone out of them. So unless we have a testosterone removal treatment -

Laughter.

Mr BEVINS - I am not suggesting that.

Ms FORREST - There are some things we cannot change, they are inherent in young men, particularly in that regard I guess. What is your view on impacting on particularly young men? Young women can be a problem too but they do not feature as much in the statistics.

Mr BEVINS - I think it is a real issue. Advertising is one of the testosterone-modifying tools in a way. There's the latest campaign in New South Wales with the little pinkie. Are you aware of that campaign that has been running here? We did not do it but it is that no-one thinks big of you if you speed.

Ms FORREST - Oh, okay. I can see some images there.

Mr BEVINS - It is targeted at young men, hoons essentially.

Ms FORREST - When one of my friends had her fourth boy, a friend gave her a big sponge with Testosterone Soaking Up Sponge written on it for when they got to adolescence so that she could wipe the walls with it in the house, and she has, I think. But perhaps you could have a testosterone-soaking-up sponge that wipes the car out before you actually start the engine. I thought that was quite cute.

Mr HARRISS - Very innovative isn't it.

Mr BEVINS - But that is what is needed I think. Given that that is really the one issue that has not been addressed - well, there are probably many issues I suppose, but it is the most significant issue. We looked at cars and we saw all the problems with them and because people get impaled by the steering column we said let's fix that. People hit the windscreen when they crash, so let's install seatbelts and air bags. There's been a massive amount of work. We now have ABS braking systems. There would be solutions to young males' testosterone that have not even been conceived yet and it would be a really interesting thing to address that issue from a scientific point of view, from an educational point of view. It may be as simple as talking about it.

Ms FORREST - My sponge might work.

Mr BEVINS - Your sponge could work.

Ms FORREST - You see. You boys might laugh at that.

Mr BEVINS - It might.

CHAIR - And from a psychological point of view?

Mr BEVINS - There is education in schools now where young men and women are educated to the point of getting a licence. But it is a fact that the testosterone is there, and it should be something that is celebrated in other areas. Young men surf, catch big waves, they do all sorts of things.

Ms FORREST - Jump out of aeroplanes.

Mr BEVINS - There are some that will never be convinced, but I believe that with the majority of them you could have a conversation either person to person or through advertising or whatever.

Ms FORREST - Could you have the conversation before that testosterone really starts to happen and then a slightly different approach obviously once they -

Mr BEVINS - Yes, you may. It may be a hard conversation to have before it happens, I suppose. The irony of it is that you do not even get to be aware of it as a man until you are in your 50s or your 60s and you look back and you understand what is going on. Maybe ways of equipping parents to talk to children about it - as you say, the sponge idea is a really great idea for at least getting -

Ms FORREST - It is a bit of a change in way but -

Mr BEVINS - It is, but it allows a mum to have a conversation with her son and to be an influence.

Mr DEAN - John, how do you know that you are getting through to those people who are most vulnerable when they are driving vehicles? You cannot stereotype them. In Tasmania it is somewhat similar to what it is here; we have a lot of P-plate drivers unfortunately involved in horrific accidents and I think it is up to about age 25 the figure is, 16 to 25 or thereabouts. How do you know that the advertising programs that you have are actually getting through to that group of people?

Mr BEVINS - I think ultimately you know by what happens to the road toll. You can do research - we do not do it but our client, RTA, does tracking studies that are able to measure the effectiveness of the advertising in terms of getting the message across and understanding the message - and you can run focus groups.

Mr DEAN - We know now that many of them are very much involved in their computers and so on and a lot of them do not read the newspapers, a lot of them do not watch television so obviously a lot of the advertising you are doing is through the Net?

Mr BEVINS - Yes, we run advertising. The particular campaigns I have talked about were primarily television but they were extended through to the Internet.

Mr DEAN - I would be delighted if today when you switched on your computer a road safety message would come straight up on it before you could do anything else with it.

Mr BEVINS - Yes. We have to come to terms with the capacity for the Internet to glorify - certainly cinema glorifies road accidents and speed and Internet games allow you to synthesise the experience of speeding.

Ms FORREST - Maybe the Road Safety Task Force in Tasmania needs to be everybody's friend on Facebook and Myspace.

Mr BEVINS - Yes.

CHAIR - It is refreshing and encouraging to hear your views about the desirability of young people being influenced by information sessions, if not instruction because most of the authorities take the view that teenagers feel they know everything and it is a waste of time. One approach is to deal with it as Ms Forrest was saying, initially at primary school stage and then going right through and boosting it perhaps at adolescence stage. I have always felt there was great merit in having some requirement for people getting their licence for the first time to at least have been given a lot of helpful information about what to do in emergencies and how to avoid certain dangerous situations and to develop the right attitude to road use.

Mr BEVINS - Yes, and those attitudes can be formed very early in life. It is interesting what you just said. By giving information about what to do in an emergency you are communicating that horrific things happen on the road, but in a positive way, and you are putting the person in control rather than wagging your finger at them and saying, 'Have a look at this horrific scene of what happened on the road. Don't you do anything like that' and what to do in an emergency could be taught at a very young age.

CHAIR - Yes, that is right.

Mr DEAN - On the advertising campaigns that are used, many of them are very strong, in my view, and are very good. It just seems to me that when you talk to some of the young people out there, I have heard a number of them saying, 'I've never seen it'. When you're going for your learner's licence and/or you are off your learner's and coming onto your P plates, a question should be asked, 'Have you seen these advertisements; what impact have they had on you?', as part of that process of moving forward. Do you think there's some merit in that?

Mr BEVINS - Yes, I think there's real merit in that because you'd be accumulating data, which is another way to measure the effectiveness of the advertising. You'd have to structure the questions very carefully and you would want to be sure that the person applying for the licence wasn't just giving you the answer they thought was going to get them the licence.

Ms FORREST - Would it be preferable, rather than making it a condition or part of that process, to have focus groups for young people who have their provisional licence or

whatever and they're under no pressure to get the answers right? Would that be more likely to get an accurate representation of their views?

Mr BEVINS - I think you are right in that regard. Are you thinking of focus groups as a prerequisite - attending a focus group?

Ms FORREST - No. I think you alluded to the fact that you would probably do something along these lines after you've run a campaign, particularly targeting young drivers, just to gauge the feedback.

Mr BEVINS - Yes. It would be interesting to do a quantitative study if, as part of the process of applying for your licence, you responded to some questions about road safety advertising. It would be interesting to capture the viewpoint of individuals at that crucial point, as they are about to become drivers.

CHAIR - Would it be at all possible for us to have access to some of your main advertising on television?

Mr BEVINS - Yes, we'd be happy to put it together.

CHAIR - Generally, in terms of road safety, where do you see the priorities or the main problems?

Mr BEVINS - Personally, I feel that as a society we have to be honest with ourselves about the issue. At the moment I believe it is very easy to blame certain segments within the society, particularly young P-plate drivers because they are high risk, and for the behaviour of society generally to be out of kilter with what we proclaim the problem to be. We proclaim the problem to be a massive issue within society. We talk about the number of people killed on the roads relative to people killed in air crashes and so on, and yet we still seem to have a cavalier attitude about road safety. We all speed from time to time. I drive home across the Sydney Harbour Bridge and because I work on road safety I try to stay within the limit, but I will get overtaken by a bus full of passengers, breaking the speed limit. The pilot of a jumbo jet would not break the rules and regulations of flying, and yet the driver of a bus can break the rules and regulations of using the road and seemingly get away with it. I am not saying necessarily there should be more police on the roads but I think private bus companies need to take responsibility for road safety. We all need to take responsibility rather than point the finger at groups that represent the disproportionate contribution to the road toll.

Mr DEAN - John, you would probably then subscribe to the view that big organisations employing people should take a greater role in road safety. In other words, they should be enforcing their positions onto their employees: 'If you infringe, if you break the laws, then you will lose your job'.

Mr BEVINS - Exactly. It is illegal to use a mobile phone whilst driving if it is not hands-free. I expect it is the same in Tasmania?

CHAIR - Yes.

Mr BEVINS - Yet you see lots of drivers doing it - and private drivers might get away with it - but you also see lots of delivery trucks and company drivers doing it as well. The other big area is one that must be hard for young people, being told one thing and seeing evidence of a totally opposite view. If most roads have a speed limit of 110 kph in Australia, why are cars sold with speedometers that go to 240 kph? Why does new car advertising continue to glorify speed? It is very hard. Smoking doesn't have this problem. Another area that we worked in over the years was antismoking. It was quite clear that it was legal to smoke but it wasn't tolerated by the medical profession, World Health Organisation et cetera. Even cigarette packets now have big warnings on them. I think there is almost a wink-wink, nudge-nudge factor with road safety from a societal point of view.

Ms FORREST - I think one of the problems is the mixed messages you get. I had the TV on in my room this morning and the *Today* show was on. There was an opportunity to win an Audi and they had an ad with an Audi speeding around all over the place. As it was driving around it was doing burn-outs. The voice-over was saying it had eight airbags and numerous safety features, but the person driving was driving like a lunatic. There are mixed messages that because it has all these safety features you can drive like a lunatic and you will be okay. That is message that is coming across, not in road safety ads but in advertisements for cars.

Mr BEVINS - That is exactly right.

Ms FORREST - How do we overcome that?

Mr BEVINS - I don't know. The advertising industry has a robust, self-regulatory regime and those ads are there to be complained about. I think a lot of car manufacturers, not all but some, like to find loopholes and ways to continue to promote speed when they know they are not really there to promote speed.

Ms FORREST - The ad never once said, 'This car will do 200 kph in 10 seconds', or anything like that, but the visual image was just that. It would go at great speed and do all these wonderful things and had the airbags to protect you while you did it.

Mr DEAN - It would be an easy enough thing to put on cars today - a cut-out at 130 kph or 140 kph.

Mr BEVINS - I would imagine a speed governor would be an easy thing to do.

CHAIR - As long as the facility is there to speed up in the event of an emergency.

Mr BEVINS - Yes, that's right.

The big argument against seatbelts prior to their introduction was what would happen if a car went into a creek or something and the occupant couldn't get their seatbelt off and drowned. It is more the message that it is sending; I do not think there are many people driving at 150 kph and the few who do probably get caught. I can't think of any other area where there is such a contradiction between the size of the problem and the acceptance that it is a problem and yet there is a tolerance of evidence that suggests the problem is not there.

CHAIR - You mentioned the visible presence of police on the roads. Do you consider that a worthwhile deterrent, to have more visible presence, increasing the risk or the likelihood of detection?

Mr BEVINS - Yes, I think so if that can be achieved. I understand it is very costly to have police on the roads but there is no doubt that a visible police presence deters people from speeding.

CHAIR - If we had a system of volunteer police, as they do in the UK, about 15 000 who are required to keep the police forces there going and may help to have more on the roads.

Thank you very much for coming to speak with us; we appreciate you giving us your time and the benefit of your considerable expertise in this area and we look forward to being able to see some of the commercials that you have produced.

Mr DEAN - Do you share your advertising across the States from time to time?

Mr BEVINS - Yes, we do. The campaign that we ran here, the driver fatigue featuring Dr Karl Kruszelnicki, which was very successful, has run in Queensland and other States I think.

Mr DEAN - Do you do any work for Department of Infrastructure in Hobart?

Mr BEVINS - No, but we would certainly be happy to meet with them.

CHAIR - Do you do the advertising exclusively for the New South Wales authorities in road safety?

Mr BEVINS - Not exclusively as there are other agencies involved.

CHAIR - I meant that the work you do in this area is only for New South Wales authorities, it doesn't go into other States.

Mr BEVINS - Yes.

I was thinking that it is wonderful that Tasmania is looking into this whole area. In 1979 New South Wales did a similar thing with smoking and led the world with antismoking initiatives and quite revolutionary programs and campaigns. In 1982 when the agency started we had the brief from Peter Cox, the Minister for Transport, and it remains the best brief that I have ever had in my advertising career. Simply he looked at me and very sincerely said, 'I want to get the blood off the roads' and it was clear that he did. This was before the introduction of random breath testing, when it was quite normal to drink and drive and to drive home, if not drunk, then very sozzled. There was no stigma attached to doing it whatsoever; it was socially accepted. With that political will he introduced random breath testing. There was huge opposition to it in New South Wales, as you can imagine, because it had not happened anywhere else. I think there is enormous progress to be made but it will take that leadership.

CHAIR - And considerable funds. Do you think that media have a role in providing free air time and space to get the message across because of the large spate of accidents throughout Australia?

Mr BEVINS - They could have a role. I do not think that they have a role at the moment; it would be wonderful if they accepted a role. I do not think that they have any obligation but a community-minded medium could well take on that issue, particularly in a State like Tasmania where I think that you have the opportunity to try new things and experiment with things and see what kind of result you can get. It would be great to have the media on-side.

CHAIR - The number of deaths in Australia each year is much greater than we lose in times of war these days, since the Second World War. It is a matter of war on the roads and in terms of trying to save lives I would have hoped that media would be prepared to provide some free time, free space for the type of commercials that you are producing.

Mr BEVINS - I would encourage you to engage with them on that. It is very hard to get community service advertising for charities on air or in the newspapers. We work for a number of pro bono charities, and over the years we have seen how much harder it is because there are more and more charities competing for that space. Conventionally attuned newspaper proprietors would say that is not charity but it is true community service. If you take community service at its word it is looking at one of communities biggest problems. As you say it is like war. The people who are lost are the young men and women of the country.

CHAIR - If we have two or three deaths in Afghanistan that receives nationwide, continued attention, quite appropriately these days, but we have so many more deaths on the roads.

Mr BEVINS - Yes.

Ms FORREST - We took evidence in South Australia that the tabloid paper became involved with the TAC, which is their insurance company, and the police and someone else after they had a blitz on an issue. They had media attention, particularly in the newspaper, before, during and after the blitz. It is being done in some parts but maybe that is something that needs to be looked at. It was not advertising, it was personal stories as well as the police writing their bit about what they were hoping to achieve and then at the end of it how many people were caught et cetera.

CHAIR - It has been very helpful to us. We know how busy you are and thank you very much indeed for sharing your time with us, and your views.

THE DISCUSSION CONCLUDED.