



Taking a Stand: The CDC Motorcycle Safety Guide

About CDC's MVIP

As America's Public Health Agency, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) puts science into action for a safer and healthier America. Their job in Motor Vehicle Injury Prevention – a program in CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control – is to provide public health leadership as they conduct scientific research and provide evidence-based recommendations to keep people safe on the road – drivers, passengers, and pedestrians – so that no one suffers needlessly.

About ResearchWorks

We're dedicated to helping socially-minded organizations advance their mission and improve their bottom line. We provide marketing and communication strategies to life sciences, hospitals, nonprofits, medical device companies, and others working for improved health.

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The Challenge

The Motor Vehicle Injury Prevention (MVIP) team at CDC was determined to respond to a troubling trend. Motorcycle deaths in America were rapidly increasing, and MVIP needed to communicate the best way to save lives. There was only one problem: a lot of controversy surrounded this issue! How could the CDC give due diligence to both sides of the issue and the science while, creating an effective communication tool that wins people's hearts and minds?

We were brought in to help strategize the most effective way to communicate this message – in a printed safety guide - with the important goal of helping policymakers understand this complicated and controversial issue, and to move people to save lives.

The Breakthrough

While the science was clear on what would save lives and save money, getting into people's hearts and minds in order to make the message emotionally relevant and engaging required something else. Applying communication theory and principles along with the marketing mantra of "know your audience", we included stories of real people affected by the tragedy and damage of unhelmeted motorcycle riding (see example on the next page). Pulled from research and interviews we conducted, we developed a holistic safety guide that provided the right balance of science and emotion, increasing the impact of the Motorcycle Safety Guide.

We went to work researching every angle of both sides of the discourse, interviewing first responders and researchers, and analyzing data. The science showed that helmet use was the most effective in preventing needless death and injury, and that universal helmet laws were the most effective way to ensure helmet use. In addition to providing a thorough snapshot of the live-saving impact of helmet use, we were also able to demonstrate how helmet use can save the public money. We created a toolkit that summarized our



qualitative and quantitative research and supplemented this with one-pagers for each state that included a “report card” for that state’s performance in the field of motorcycle safety.

The Results

When strategizing how to tackle a project like this, the question is not, “Is the data available?”, but rather, “What story does the data tell?”. In this case, there was a lot of data. Our challenge was to see what it meant, beyond fatality and accident reports. What we found were numbers that supported the idea that this public health issue is one of social responsibility: what affects one of us, affects all of us. Strengthening the personal safety argument with a social return on investment (SROI) allowed the CDC to take an informed, thorough stand on this controversial issue.

The toolkit was so successful that it was re-released with updated data in 2012! On June 19, 2012, the PBS News Hour ([click here to view](#)) produced an 8-minute segment discussing the debate on motorcycle helmet laws and providing analysis of the CDC motorcycle safety toolkit. CDC has always been an important force in the public health arena. This toolkit helped MVIP solidify its role as a leader in the area of injury prevention.

WHO DIES?

While studying for ministry, I spent a year as chaplain resident at a Chicago hospital. I was “on call” one evening when the emergency room paged me. An ambulance had just brought in a fellow who’d been riding his motorcycle without a helmet when an SUV had turned in front of him. Unable to turn or stop, he had hit the vehicle, ramming his head into a door.

He was a classic “biker dude”: muscular arms, tattoos, and a couple day’s growth of beard. He was unconscious and his face was swollen and turning purple. Emergency room staff swarmed around him.

I spent most of the night with that family. I listened to their stories, I shared their tears. The couple had two teenagers, plus a younger girl, age nine. I think about his family every time I see a biker zoom by without a helmet. Helmets and cautious driving save lives.

If, like this fellow, you have tough biker friends, I suppose they will tease you pretty hard if you do wear a helmet. It takes a thick skin and courage to handle teasing. Then again, **I wonder how much courage it took for the nine-year-old girl to go in and say goodbye to her father?**

-Reverend Dennis McCarty¹¹

