

Using the news media to disseminate seat belt information to the American public: how police interact with the media and how can we improve it

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February 2010

**USING THE NEWS MEDIA TO DISSEMINATE SEAT BELT INFORMATION TO THE
AMERICAN PUBLIC: HOW POLICE INTERACT WITH THE MEDIA AND HOW CAN
WE IMPROVE IT**

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Disclaimer

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16. Abstract <p>The local news media commonly report motor vehicle crashes (MVC). Police have been identified as prominent spokespeople during these news stories and when interviewed, convey more prevention information to the public. Despite this, little is known about the interaction between police and the news media, the police officers perception of their role in MVC prevention or police officers previous media training.</p> <p>To address these issues, this project conducted a content analysis of local newspaper MVC reporting along with in-depth interviews with police information officers in a midwestern city of 100,000 population and used this information to develop a web-based MVC media training tool.</p> <p>Police information officers regularly interact with the news media, report very little, if any, formal media training, view MVC prevention as a significant part of their job description, and believe that a web-based MVC media training tool is useful to them and their colleagues.</p> <p>Training police officers how to insert prevention messages into “everyday” news stories about MVC may be a cost effective way of reaching the public with important information about seat belt use and motor vehicle safety. A web-based training tool may be helpful to optimize this opportunity provide by the news media.</p>			
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SI* (MODERN METRIC) CONVERSION FACTORS

APPROXIMATE CONVERSIONS TO SI UNITS

Symbol	When You Know	Multiply By	To Find	Symbol
LENGTH				
in	inches	25.4	millimeters	mm
ft	feet	0.305	meters	m
yd	yards	0.914	meters	m
mi	miles	1.61	kilometers	km
AREA				
in ²	square inches	645.2	square millimeters	mm ²
ft ²	square feet	0.093	square meters	m ²
yd ²	square yard	0.836	square meters	m ²
ac	acres	0.405	hectares	ha
mi ²	square miles	2.59	square kilometers	km ²
VOLUME				
fl oz	fluid ounces	29.57	milliliters	mL
gal	gallons	3.785	liters	L
ft ³	cubic feet	0.028	cubic meters	m ³
yd ³	cubic yards	0.765	cubic meters	m ³
NOTE: volumes greater than 1000 L shall be shown in m ³				
MASS				
oz	ounces	28.35	grams	g
lb	pounds	0.454	kilograms	kg
T	short tons (2000 lb)	0.907	megagrams (or "metric ton")	Mg (or "t")
TEMPERATURE (exact degrees)				
°F	Fahrenheit	5 (F-32)/9 or (F-32)/1.8	Celsius	°C
ILLUMINATION				
fc	foot-candles	10.76	lux	lx
fl	foot-Lamberts	3.426	candela/m ²	cd/m ²
FORCE and PRESSURE or STRESS				
lbf	poundforce	4.45	newtons	N
lbf/in ²	poundforce per square inch	6.89	kilopascals	kPa
APPROXIMATE CONVERSIONS FROM SI UNITS				
Symbol	When You Know	Multiply By	To Find	Symbol
LENGTH				
mm	millimeters	0.039	inches	in
m	meters	3.28	feet	ft
m	meters	1.09	yards	yd
km	kilometers	0.621	miles	mi
AREA				
mm ²	square millimeters	0.0016	square inches	in ²
m ²	square meters	10.764	square feet	ft ²
m ²	square meters	1.195	square yards	yd ²
ha	hectares	2.47	acres	ac
km ²	square kilometers	0.386	square miles	mi ²
VOLUME				
mL	milliliters	0.034	fluid ounces	fl oz
L	liters	0.264	gallons	gal
m ³	cubic meters	35.314	cubic feet	ft ³
m ³	cubic meters	1.307	cubic yards	yd ³
MASS				
g	grams	0.035	ounces	oz
kg	kilograms	2.202	pounds	lb
Mg (or "t")	megagrams (or "metric ton")	1.103	short tons (2000 lb)	T
TEMPERATURE (exact degrees)				
°C	Celsius	1.8C+32	Fahrenheit	°F
ILLUMINATION				
lx	lux	0.0929	foot-candles	fc
cd/m ²	candela/m ²	0.2919	foot-Lamberts	fl
FORCE and PRESSURE or STRESS				
N	newtons	0.225	poundforce	lbf
kPa	kilopascals	0.145	poundforce per square inch	lbf/in ²

*SI is the symbol for the International System of Units. Appropriate rounding should be made to comply with Section 4 of ASTM E380.
(Revised March 2003)

PROBLEM

Motor vehicle crashes (MVC) are the number one cause of death for people 1-44 years of age (Kochanek & Smith, 2002). Seat belts and child restraint systems have been shown to be effective in reducing injury and death (NHTSA, 2006). All but one of the states have an adult seat belt law and many states are now in the process of passing legislation to address booster seat restraints. Changing seat belt enforcement from secondary to primary has positively influenced the public's perception of risk (Farmer & Williams, 2005); however, despite seat belt and booster seat laws many automobile occupants are still not properly restrained. One possible explanation for this occurrence would be the lack of information regarding the benefits of seat belts and booster seat information reaching the public.

Traditional media campaigns that utilize paid advertising or public service announcements (PSA) have been shown to be successful in increasing seat belt usage (Solomon, Ulmer & Preusser, 2002; Williams & Wells, 2004). Although useful, these campaigns are costly and may not be sustainable without significant national funding.

Previous work has demonstrated that MVC are the number one unintentional injury event reported on local news outlets across America and police officers are the most prominent spokesperson interviewed following motor vehicle crashes (Pribble, Trowbridge, Kamat, Fowler, Goldstein & Hargarten, 2008). Additionally, when the news media interviews police officers, the stories contain significantly more prevention information, including seat belt usage recommendations than stories without a police interview (Pribble, Trowbridge, Kamat, Fowler, Goldstein & Hargarten, 2008).

As the news media preferentially seeks out police officers for motor vehicle crash information, there is an opportunity to influence the motor vehicle injury message reaching the public. Local news reaches many more people than traditional media campaigns and at a lower cost. Assessing how police interact with the news media, police officers perceptions of these interactions and their perceived role in MVC prevention are needed to optimize this opportunity to reach the public. If police officers are amenable to this method, media training of police officers and development of tools that improve these police-reporter news media interactions following MVC may be a low cost method of enhancing communication of MVC risk and the usefulness of proper seat belt usage.

APPROACH

This project utilized content analysis of local newspaper reports of MVC to identify characteristics of MVC reporting along with in-depth interviews of police information officers (PIO) to assess how local police interact with the news media during local news reporting of motor vehicle crashes. In addition, this project attempted to identify police perceptions of the news media and to further understand how police view their role as prevention spokespeople. Finally, we developed a MVC media-training tool based on recommendations gained from these police interviews to assist police officers who are interviewed by the news media so that MVC and seat belt prevention information can be conveyed to the public on a continuous basis.

METHODOLOGY

Content Analysis

Local news coverage of MVC reported in the daily newspaper within a Midwestern community of approximately 100,000 people and a circulation of 45,000 was captured. Content analysis of the local newspaper coverage of MVC was conducted from November 2008 to July 2009 to assess how motor vehicle crash stories were reported with specific emphasis on risk factors discussed and to identify the prominent police spokesperson interviewed.

Motor vehicle crash stories reported within each local daily newspaper were identified. A motor vehicle crash story was defined as any cohesive news story that discussed any traffic mishap involving a motorized vehicle traveling on a road or highway; and /or a cohesive story involving injury or potential injury to a person or property caused by a motorized vehicle traveling on a road or highway.

Each day (7-days per week) an experienced media researcher identified all motor vehicle crash stories within the local daily newspaper utilizing the definition of MVC story above. To assess clipping reliability, a second independent researcher assessed 20 percent of the daily papers. Percent agreement between the two independent researchers was 92 percent.

A content analysis codebook was developed and a database was designed in Filemaker Pro for data entry. Each motor vehicle crash story was coded for placement of the story (i.e. location / section in the newspaper), spokesperson interview, and discussion of risk factors and / or prevention.

In-depth Police Information Officer Interviews

The local city police department located within a midwestern city (population: 100,000) employed four information officers at the time of the project. Police information officers are commonly employed by police departments across the United States and the police information officers at this department are the primary points of contact for the local news media following local event, including motor vehicle crashes.

The research team developed the questions and structure of the interviews related to police officer and news media interaction following motor vehicle crashes. The interview was categorized into four major topics with sub-topics that addressed more specific issues related to each major topic. Four major topics that were included in the in-depth interview were:

1. Police interactions and experience with the news media
2. Current perceptions of Police Officer's role in prevention
3. Current perceptions of Police Officer's role in policy
4. Identifying resources available and potential tools that will assist Police Officer interaction with the news media following a MVC injury event

The University of Michigan Medical School IRB approval was obtained prior to conducting the in-depth interviews.

After informed consent was obtained, four police officers from the local Police Department were interviewed individually by the principal investigator. These interviews were an average of 60 minutes in duration and each interview was recorded on two separate 80 gigabyte iPod (Apple Inc, California) recording devices to ensure capture. Once captured, each audio was transferred as a WAV file to a 150 gigabyte MacBook Pro computer (Apple Inc, California) for storage. Each audio was fully transcribed verbatim.

De-identified transcripts were reviewed independently by three members of the research team. Common themes that were identified during independent review were then thematically analyzed by the research group and major themes were derived by consensus of research team.

Media Tool

Using the information gathered from the content analysis and the in-depth interviews, a web-based media-training tool was developed. A follow up survey of the PIO was completed after dissemination of the media-training tool to assess the police officer's perceived usefulness of the tool. This media tool can be found at: <http://www.med.umich.edu/em/mvc/>.

The web-based media guide provides fact sheets, media training techniques and tips, injury prevention statistics, and example interview questions / answers that may be useful when the police officer is interviewed by the news media following a motor vehicle crash. The web-based tool also has links to organizations that support booster seat/seatbelt use and promote MVC prevention.

Feedback from the police officers involved in the study was solicited to refine the web-based tool. The precise content finally included in the web-based tool was informed by the feedback from the officers.

FINDINGS

The local daily newspaper reported 145 motor vehicle crash stories during the content analysis period (Nov 2008-Jul 2009). Ninety-three percent of all MVC stories were reported within the first section of the newspaper, 72 percent of stories involved a local citizen in a crash, 68 percent involved an injury and 74 percent of MVC stories interviewed a police officer. Figure 1 demonstrates that police officers are by far the most commonly interviewed source of information during local newspaper reporting of MVC. The police jurisdiction within this study community is divided into: city police, county sheriff and state police departments. Of the stories that interviewed a police officer, 32 percent interviewed a city police, 33 percent interviewed a county sheriff, and 35 percent interviewed state police.

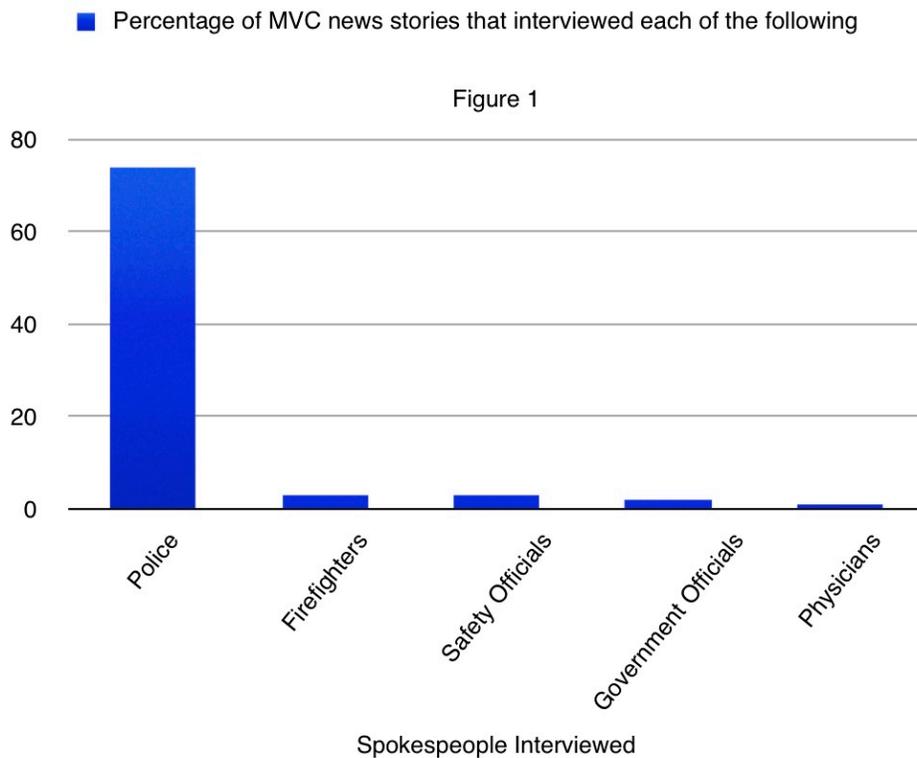
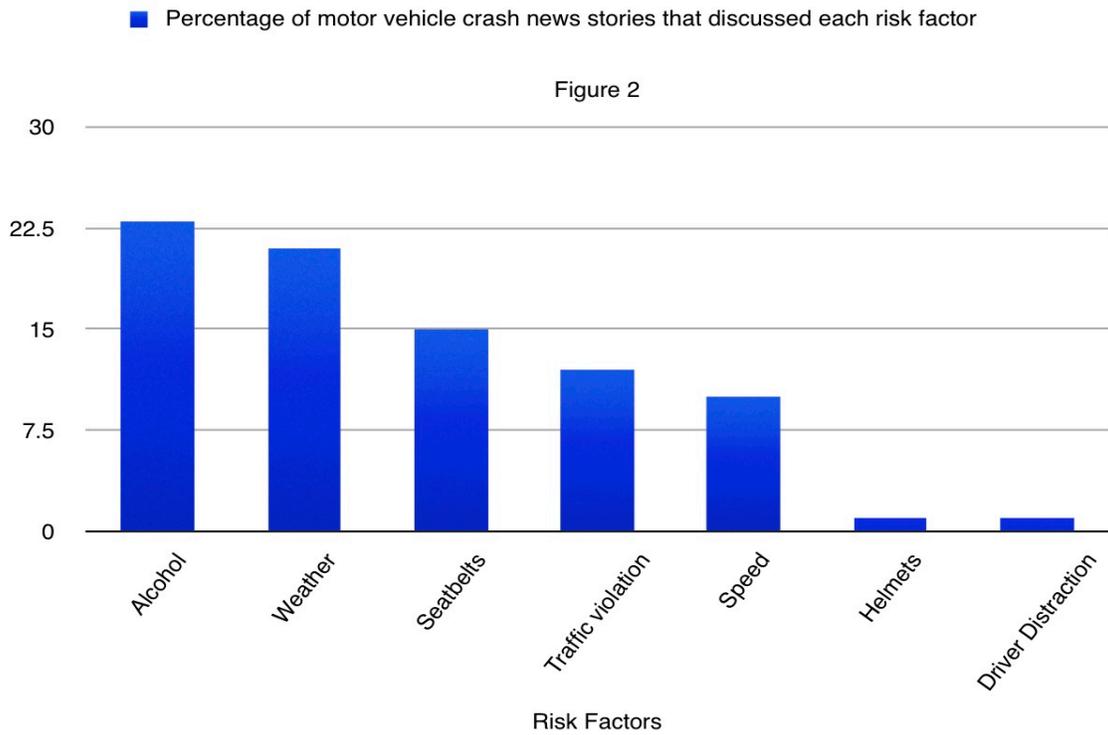


Figure 2 shows the percentages of MVC stories reported in the local newspaper that discussed various risk factors. Alcohol was reported in 23 percent, seat belt use in 15 percent, speed in 10 percent and weather in 21 percent of the stories.



In-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed. Table 1 provides the major themes identified by police interviews.

Table 1: Major Themes of Police Interview
All had a good / excellent working relationship with the news media.
Interviews are initiated by the news organization, except in special circumstances when the police want to get traffic information to the public.
Severity of crash, uniqueness (ie: 1000 chickens running on the roads), celebrity involvement, injury / deaths were indicators of important crashes to the news media.
Common questions encountered by police: Injured? Seatbelts? Alcohol? Weather? Speed?
Most police had little or no media training.
Police rely on their experience to educate themselves about characteristics and risk factors for motor vehicle safety and the effectiveness of seatbelts etc.
Police thought prevention and education of the public about motor vehicle safety was a big part of their job and all had more “passion” when the prevention measure involved children.
Police felt comfortable discussing current laws in place such as seatbelts, child restraints, speeding, and alcohol use as opposed to pending legislation.
Some police felt comfortable talking about prevention measure that were based in evidence but were not yet laws. However, some would not.
Police would not like to state their opinion.
When speaking about a specific crash, most police would qualify their statements on prevention measures used by the passengers.
Most often, police are at their desk when contacted by the news media, mostly by phone and have access to a computer during most news interviews.
Police thought statistics would help in getting a prevention message out and feel it adds to the credibility of the message.
Police thought that a web-based media-training source would be helpful.
Police thought that the news media is an important means of getting prevention and safety information to the public.

Web-based media tool

A web-based motor vehicle crash media tool was developed and provided to the police information officers involved in the study. The media-tool (see appendix) was divided into several sections for easy navigation. Section one described the importance of police involvement in getting prevention messages out to the public. Section two described a commonly used media technique for bridging to a prevention message. Section three provided media tips about how to prepare and conduct an interview. Section four provided local and state level statistics on risk factors commonly addressed during newspaper reporting of local MVC.

Following dissemination of the web-based media tool, a survey was conducted to assess the police information officer's perceived usefulness of the tool.

Four police officers returned completed surveys following review of the web-based media tool. All thought the website was useful, easy to navigate and could be used to improve the dissemination of MVC prevention information to the public during news media interviews. All but one police officer agreed that the statistical information was the correct amount, with the one in disagreement desiring more statistical content. All agreed that they would recommend this web-based media tool to their colleagues who get interviewed by the news following MVC.

Table 2 describes some of the police write-in comments about the web-based media-tool.

Table 2: Police comments about web-based MVC media-tool
"It is a great tool for the officer who has little or no experience in dealing with the media to make good choices on the type of responses he/she uses."
"I feel this site is complete and extremely helpful."
"I would absolutely use this site. I have always felt that the training police PIO's receive is inadequate. I am greatly encouraged that we now have a resource that is accurate and easy to use."
"The statistical information contained and the techniques outlined to help the PIO with media interviews are extremely valuable."
"I would recommend this site to newer PIO's."
"Easy to use, informative."

CONCLUSIONS

The local newspapers report often on MVC. Three out of every four MVC stories reported by the news media included an interview with police. Common issues addressed during these news stories address major risk factors for MVC and may provide an opportunity to disseminate prevention information to the public through the mainstream news media.

This was the first study to address how the police interact with the news media following local MVC. Police officers appear to embrace their role as public service spokespeople, however, few get any formal media training. A web-based media training tool was well received by police information officers and is seen as a useful method for improving their ability to handle media questions following MVC. Optimizing the message reported by the news media may be an inexpensive means of providing prevention information to the public on a continuous basis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A larger scale version of the web-based media tool should be completed and tested in other markets and by various department types (i.e. local vs county vs state police) to verify these findings. However, given the low cost of the web-based tool, it may be a useful adjunct to other local, state, or regional MVC prevention media campaigns to improve seat belt use and motor vehicle safety.

APPENDIX: MEDIA-TRAINING TOOL



University of Michigan
Health System



Motor Vehicle Crash Media Guide

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for Americans 1-44 years old.

Informing our communities about the importance of seat belts and the problems with driving under the influence of alcohol is a vital part of public safety

Police Officers have a tremendous opportunity to deliver this information through the mainstream news media following car crashes that happen in their communities.

Police Officers can use this website as a quick link to develop methods for inserting prevention messages when interviewed by the news media.

This media guide website will help Police Officers avoid speculative questions and focus the story on how motor vehicle crash deaths and injuries can be prevented.

Police Officers communicating to the public through the news media, can and do make a difference by helping prevent motor vehicle injuries from happening

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TECHNIQUES FOR ANSWERING MEDIA QUESTIONS

Remember: The Police Officer controls the information that is given to the news media

The **“BLOCK AND BRIDGE”** technique allows Police Officers to answer questions quickly or avoid answering certain questions that may pose problems with investigations etc. This technique allows the Police Officer to fill the potential void of not answering a question with prevention information instead of answering, “I don't know” or “No comment”.

Using **“BLOCK AND BRIDGE”** is a win-win situation for both Police Officers and the News Media. The media get a terrific sound bite and the Police Officer can avoid the difficult questions that may not have answers so soon after the crash.

“BLOCK AND BRIDGE” allows the Police Officers to **BLOCK** the question posed with a short answer or a pre-determined phrase, followed by **BRIDGING** phrases that allow progression to useful educational or prevention statements.

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COMMON NEWS MEDIA QUESTIONS

Was anyone injured or killed?

Was speed a factor?

Who was involved?

Was weather a factor?

Was alcohol a factor in the crash?

What was the cause of the crash?

Who was at fault?

How many people were in the car?

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COMMON BRIDGING PHRASES

"What I think you are really asking is..."
 "The overall issue is..."
 "What's important to remember is..."
 "It's our policy to not discuss... , but what I can tell you is..."
 "Your viewers / readers need to know..."
 "It's too early to determine..."
 "Our traffic investigators are in the process of determining that..."

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BLOCK AND BRIDGE EXAMPLES

Reporter: "What caused this car accident?"
Police Officer: "It's too early to determine exact cause, but crashes like these prompts us to remind everyone to wear their seat-belt every time they get into the car"

Reporter: "Was speed a factor in this car accident?"
Police Officer: "What I think you are really asking is whether speed is a factor in most crashes? The answer to that question is Yes. Most crashes can be prevented if all drivers just slow down"

Reporter: "Were seat belts used in this car accident?"
Police Officer: "Our traffic investigators are in the process of determining that but what the public needs to know is that wearing seat belts is the law and 500 lives are saved each year in Michigan by people buckling up".

Reporter: "Was alcohol involved in this car accident?"
Police Officer: "It appears that alcohol may have been involved and your viewers need to know that alcohol contributes to 1 out of every 3 motor vehicle deaths in the US". "No one should ever get behind the wheel after they have had too much to drink".

Reporter: "How many people were involved?"
Police Officer: "Three adults and two children; I would just like to inform the public that, in Michigan, children less than 4 foot 9 inches or less than 8 years old need to be seat belted in a booster seat"

Reporter: "Was anyone killed?"
Police Officer: "There was one person ejected who died at the scene and what's important to remember is that 75% of people ejected from a car during a crash end up dead. Using seat belts stop the occupants from being ejected."

Reporter: "Was weather a factor?"
Police Officer: "Weather may have contributed in this crash and each year 7400 people are killed in weather-related traffic crashes across the country. "

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Being able to control the interview requires practice and preparation. Breaking the interview into three distinct parts: Before, During and After provides a method of addressing important aspects of the news media interview.

Becoming familiar with these points ensures that the opportunity to communicate to the community is optimized.

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BEFORE INTERVIEW

- Put motor vehicle safety and prevention messages in your own words
- Create "sound bites" for commonly asked questions (see common questions link)
- Consider using statistics to create "sound bites" that will be appealing to the news media
- Practice saying your sound bites so you are comfortable with them

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DURING INTERVIEW

- Try to answer reporter's specific questions, if known, with quick statements then BRIDGE to a prevention message
- Remind the public how they can prevent car crashes from happening
- Mention seat belt use laws and recommendations. Mention alcohol's impact on motor vehicle deaths.
- Provide statistics and make them simple.
- Provide the public with a "plan of action".
- Recommendations from Police Officers go a long way.

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AFTER INTERVIEW

- Agree to provide follow-up prevention information to the reporter
- If the story runs, follow-up with the reporter to insert prevention information
- Offer to serve as a resource for future prevention related motor vehicle stories

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GENERAL STATISTICS

Local

- Washtenaw County had the 5th highest number of traffic deaths in Michigan in 2008.
- Washtenaw County had the 4th highest number of alcohol related traffic deaths in Michigan in 2008.

National

- 37,261 people died in 2008 due to car crashes
- 1 out of every 3 traffic deaths involve drinking and driving
- The majority of people killed in motor vehicle crashes were not wearing seat belts
- 17 percent of all crashes are weather related

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SEAT BELT STATISTICS

- 500 lives are saved each year in Michigan because of people wearing seat belts
- Seat belts reduce the risk of death by 45% and severe injury by 50%
- Nearly 2/3rds of 16-20 year old killed in motor vehicle crashes were not wearing seat belts
- Teens are much more likely to wear a seat belt if they see their parents always wearing a seat belt. Parents be a good role model for your teen.
- 3 out of 4 people ejected from a car die- seat belts keep or stop you from being ejected
- Booster seats reduce the risk of injury to kids aged 4-8 by 60 percent
- Only 3 out of 10 children 4-8 years old are restrained in booster seats. Don't let your child be a statistic, use booster seats - it's the law.
- All people in car need to be in proper restraints regardless of position in the car.
- Always wear seat belts- even for short trips

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ALCOHOL STATISTICS

- 1 out of 3 traffic deaths involve drinking and driving
- Never get into a car with a driver who has been drinking
- Have a transportation plan prior to going out such as a designated driver or taxi
- Alcohol involved traffic crashes are **TOTALLY** preventable

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WEATHER STATISTICS

- 7400 people are killed in weather related traffic crashes
- 75 % of weather-related crashes happen on wet pavement alone

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[Traffic Safety Fact 2008](#) from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

[How Do Weather Events Impact the Road](#) from the U.S. Department of Transportation

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