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Cyclists feel singled out in draft of Florida safety campaign

By Jodie Tillman, Times Staff Writer
In Print: Monday, June 13, 2011

Troy Dunn of the Dunn & Co. advertising agency says it is "metaphorically communicating to the audience that vehicles can be dangerous" in this draft of the Florida Department of Transportation's pedestrian and bicycle safety campaign.



[Florida Department of Transportation]

TAMPA — Troy Dunn's advertising agency promises to push boundaries. So when it got the \$125,000 state contract to create a pedestrian and bicycle safety campaign, the firm aimed to blow up the old "Share the Road" message.

One idea: Imagine a tank next to a cyclist. Imagine text saying a car is like a tank to a vulnerable cyclist.

Boom.

Then came another small explosion — from the cyclists.

...

Florida is not a safe place for bicyclists or pedestrians. The state leads the nation in bicycling and pedestrian fatalities.

Tampa Bay is no oasis. The Tampa-St. Petersburg area ranks in a new report by the group [Transportation for America](#) as the second-most dangerous for pedestrians in the country. Over the last year, more than a dozen cyclists were killed on area roads.

The question of blame shapes any discussion about cycling and pedestrian deaths. [William Roll, a consultant with Tindale-Oliver & Associates, wrote a report for Hillsborough County's bike transportation plan earlier this year about cyclist versus car accidents in the county.](#)

After reviewing accident reports from between 2005 and 2009, he concluded the blame was split 50-50.

Sometimes motorists failed to yield, sometimes cyclists did. Sometimes cyclists rode without lights. Sometimes distracted motorists rammed cyclists from behind.

Amid the accidents, the [Florida Department of Transportation](#) decided to launch a new print, radio and television campaign in this district, said department spokeswoman Kris Carson.

"We were trying to do something a little creative and out of the box to get people's attention,"

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she said.

The **Dunn & Co.** advertising agency is located in a century-old former cigar factory near Ybor City. It cultivates a hip drollness — "Quick, before it becomes trendy again," said its ad for a fondue restaurant — and its website says making clients famous is job "numero uno."

The firm first came up with the theme of "You vs. Vehicle: You lose every time."

That leaked out to the bicycling community through Alan Snel, director of **South West Florida Bicycle United Dealers**, who wrote about it on his blog.

The cyclists' problem: Was DOT blaming them — and not motorists?

"It seems to be the old piece of blaming the victim," said Tim Bustos, executive director of the **Florida Bicycle Association**. "What they should really be targeting is all road users. Yes, sometimes bicyclists do cause accidents. But frequently it's motorists."

DOT and Dunn said the title was just a work in progress. But they scrapped it from their draft materials.

Then they came up with a series of mockup ads comparing vehicles to such things as tanks or herds of buffalo.

"What we're doing is we're metaphorically communicating to the audience that vehicles can be dangerous," Dunn said. "And so what the campaign does is it uses symbolic imagery for motor vehicles that conveys they can be dangerous items. ... We think it speaks to both motorists and non-motorists."

• • •

Snel, however, attended one of the DOT meetings about the campaign last month. He didn't like what he saw and fired off an e-mail to officials.

His group, he wrote, "believes the image of a tank next to a bicyclist will carry the message to many motorists that they own the road and embolden them to believe bicyclists should not be on the road while also scaring beginner or inexperienced bicyclists from riding their bicycles on the roads."

Tampa lawyer J. Steele Olmstead, an avid cyclist, said any public campaign should be aimed at distracted drivers, who are so often responsible for hitting cyclists.

Bustos questioned why officials propose using an image of a racing cyclist, with all the expensive gear, instead of a regular Joe commuting to work. "Unfortunately, it's the racing cyclist that raises the anger level of some motorists," he said.

"It uses combat iconography," said Brad Kuhn, director of **Bike/Walk Central Florida**. "You get a tank versus a guy in Spandex."

• • •

Dunn has never worked a state job before. He wasn't quite ready for the opinions.

"It started with a misunderstanding in that it wasn't the final title, but the fuse was lit," he said. "What was evident was that Alan wanted the finger pointed at motorists. I can tell nothing is going to be good unless it blames motorists."

Snel declined to comment since Dunn had asked him and others at the public meeting not to spill the beans about the campaign. Dunn said he made the request because marketing campaigns work best when they are unveiled with a big splash.


At least one cycling advocate said he thought the original "You vs. vehicle" slogan was fine. Mike Lasche, a Sarasota activist who serves as a representative to DOT's **Florida Bicycle/Pedestrian Partnership Council**, said his colleagues were overly sensitive.

"The cycling community can be a prickly bunch, with a bit of a bunker mentality," he said. "I believe that this stems from their place on the road as a vulnerable user and a feeling that the motorist community does not appreciate the demands of that vulnerability."

The campaign launches sometime in August.

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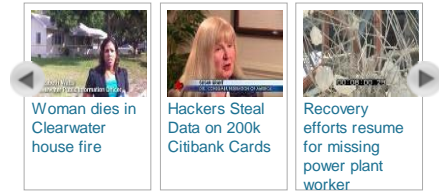
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