

Big four cellphone carriers unite on anti-texting ads (Update)

May 14 2013, by Peter Svensson



In this Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2011, file photo, a driver uses an iPhone while driving Wednesday, in Los Angeles. The country's four biggest cellphone companies are set to launch their first joint advertising campaign against texting while driving, uniting behind AT&T's "It Can Wait" slogan to blanket TV and radio during the summer of 2013. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File)

The four biggest U.S. cellphone companies are set to launch their first joint advertising campaign against texting while driving, uniting behind AT&T's "It Can Wait" slogan to blanket TV and radio this summer.

AT&T, Verizon Wireless, Sprint and T-Mobile will be joined by 200 other organizations backing the multi-million dollar ad campaign.

The campaign is unusual not just because it unites rivals, but because it represents companies warning against the dangers of their own products. After initially fighting laws against cellphone use while driving, cellphone companies have begun to embrace the language of the federal government's campaign against cellphone use by drivers.

AT&T and Verizon have run ads against texting and driving since 2009. In 2005, Sprint Nextel Corp. created an education program targeting teens learning to drive.

"Every CEO in the industry that you talk to recognizes that this is an issue that needs to be dealt with," AT&T CEO Randall Stephenson said in an interview. "I think we all understand that pooling our resources with one consistent message is a lot more powerful than all four of us having different messages and going different directions."

Beyond TV and radio ads, the new campaign will stretch into the skies through displays on Goodyear's three blimps. It will also include store displays, community events, social-media outreach and a national tour of a driving simulator. The campaign targets teens in particular.

AT&T Inc. calls texting and driving an "epidemic," a term it borrows from the federal Department of Transportation. The U.S. transportation secretary has been on a self-described "rampage" against cellphones since his term began in January 2009.

Stephenson said that "texting while driving is a deadly habit that makes you 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash." The figure refers to a 2009 government study of bus and truck drivers. It isn't based on crashes alone, but on the likelihood the drivers showed risky behavior

such as lane drifting or sharp braking, sometimes culminating in a crash.

The unified ad campaign comes as some researchers are starting to say that while texting and driving at the same time is clearly a bad idea, it's not contributing measurably to an increase in traffic accidents. The number of accidents is in a long-term decline, and the explosion of texting and smartphone use doesn't seem to be reversing that trend.

In the 2009 government study, texting, email and surfing on the cellphone was a factor in about 1 percent of crashes, well below epidemic levels.

Nonetheless, the cellphone industry and the federal government have focused their attention on cellphones.

The government's Distraction.gov site singles out cellphones as the greatest danger among all sources of driver distraction.

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