

AT&T spending millions to get message across: Texting can wait

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As AT&T Inc.'s global marketing officer, Cathy Coughlin controls billions of dollars to build the brand and land deals like the one that put AT&T's name on the Dallas Cowboys' stadium.

But there's one campaign that Coughlin says is in a class by itself. The world's largest telecommunications company will spend "tens of millions" this year to encourage people not to use its products and services - at least not when they are behind the wheel.

The 56-year-old senior executive vice president is leading the charge for It Can Wait, which aims to make texting and driving as socially unacceptable as drinking and driving.

Drivers 18 to 25 are particularly vulnerable, although the problem is mounting in all age groups.

"It's very personal for me," Coughlin said. "I have 10 nieces and nephews. I would be absolutely heartbroken if anything happened to one of them."

In 2009, AT&T Chairman and CEO Randall Stephenson told Coughlin to come up with ways to curb the dangerous habit. That effort morphed into a national movement.

For the last year, Coughlin (pronounced cog-lin) has been consorting with the enemies - Sprint Corp., T-Mobile US Inc. and Verizon

Communications Inc. - to get the message across.

"We are the fiercest competitors," Coughlin said in her headquarters office in downtown Dallas. "But this is one of those issues where everybody says, 'We have a responsibility here.'"

"We need to make sure that people know that you are 23 times more likely to be in an accident if you're texting. There's 100,000 accidents a year where texting is involved."

This alliance of telecom titans recently sponsored Drive 4 Pledges Day, patterned after the Great American Smokeout.

The four carriers spent millions of dollars on co-branded advertising on national TV, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, and helped put on nearly 2,000 events coast to coast.

More than 1,500 businesses, government agencies, nonprofits and organizations also took up the cause.

"We saw an incredible groundswell of support," Coughlin said. "Students rallied at 1,500 high schools. Mayors ... united against texting while driving. Professional sports teams rallied their fans. Blimps flew the message high over big cities."

The preliminary results: The number of people who had sworn off texting and driving had risen from 2.5 million to well over 3 million nationwide.

When AT&T held its first national pledge day a year ago, it treated the campaign like a major product launch.

"We couldn't sit on the sidelines, and there was no Mothers Against

Drunk Driving to lead the charge," Coughlin said.

Verizon's CEO, Lowell McAdam, was so impressed that he immediately called Stephenson and asked whether Verizon could join the cause, she said. Sprint and T-Mobile quickly signed on, too.

You may have seen or heard the two current hard-hitting, in-your-face commercials:

The angry and distraught mother of 8-year-old Xzavier, who lost his legs and is paralyzed from the diaphragm down after being hit by a texting motorist.

A young father who killed three Amish children riding in the family's horse-drawn buggy just after texting "I love you" to his wife.

Celebrities who have taken the pledge include country music star Tim McGraw, pro golfer Zach Johnson and pop recording artists Demi Lovato and One Republic.

A 35-minute documentary by famed director Werner Herzog has gotten 2.2 million views since it was released two months ago on the It Can Wait website.

AT&T produces all the creative work, and the partners sign off on it. The four carriers are pooling their resources to get the messages in front of the public.

"For more than a decade, Verizon has supported hands-free driving legislation across the country," said Michelle Miller, president of the Central Texas region for Verizon Wireless. "Joining forces with other carriers and the many organizations and businesses involved with the It Can Wait campaign allows us to leverage our collective resources and

helps amplify the awareness message and encourage safe driving here in Texas and across the country."

The PSAs will run on TV for 30 weeks this year vs. 16 weeks in 2012, when AT&T was going it alone, Coughlin said. "That's an example of how we're getting greater reach because we're coming together."

Ralph de la Vega, president and CEO of AT&T Mobility, has worked closely with Coughlin on It Can Wait.

"Her passion for putting an end to texting while driving is palpable," he said. "This is a movement that's touched people on a personal level and rallied our employees around the cause."

It Can Wait has become part of the AT&T corporate fabric. Any employee with a company-issued phone - and that's just about everyone - has to sign a code of conduct that includes a prohibition on texting behind the wheel.

Its 240,000 employees have universally embraced the ban, she said, and have handed out more than 2.5 million It Can Wait stickers. "It has been lightning in a bottle."

Coughlin used to be a texting offender until about seven years ago, when she bumped into a car in front of her while looking down at her BlackBerry.

She swore off texting while in the driver's seat - even at stoplights.

She wanted to show kids what it's like to go through a scare, so AT&T takes a fleet of portable simulators to high schools across the country. "They're stunned when they crash," she said. "Teens are heavy texters, new drivers - deadly combination."

Jamie Nash Wiens, who was burned over 70 percent of her body in a one-car wreck in June 2010, is one of It Can Wait's most effective spokespeople.

Earlier this year, Nash Wiens accompanied Coughlin to the Episcopal School of Dallas, where she spoke to an auditorium of 15-year-olds who were about to get their learner's permits.

Nash Wiens showed them the excruciating police dash-cam video that recorded her tortured screams while being trapped inside a burning car for 23 minutes.

She's haunted by the fact that she routinely texted while her children were with her, and they could have easily been victims of the inferno, too.

"Reliving what happened to me is very emotional," Nash Wiens said. "But I know that it's for a good cause - to get my story out there, influence others not to text and drive, and hopefully save lives. So I push my feelings aside."

Coughlin said the word is getting out.

"Seventy-five percent of Americans have heard the message on the dangers of texting and driving," she said. "But we haven't gotten 75 percent of Americans to stop [texting](#) and driving. Now we have to move the needle on behavior.

"We're going to stay after this."

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