

# Marketing Safety to Teens: State Literature Review and Analysis

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## Introduction

It's well-known that teens are a high-risk driving group. Recently, graduated driver's licensing laws have been passed in most states to help give teens the regulations, supervision, and training to learn to be safe drivers.

These laws seem to be having an impact, but changing behavior is not accomplished by laws alone, as evidenced by smoking and drinking laws that teens are notorious for breaking. Behavior is also not only determined by the facts teens know but through complicated emotional and sociological needs and situations as well.

Traffic crashes are the number one killer of teens.

Departments of transportation and departments of motor vehicles have, of course, the statistics, reports, and facts to give teens the head knowledge about the consequences of unsafe driving and the best practices for safe driving, but are they going a step further and actually trying to persuade teens to adopt these safe driving behaviors? Are they connecting to the teen audience? What, if anything, are they doing to persuade teens to drive safely?

As the editorial assistant for *Go!* magazine, a free online magazine promoting transportation careers to teens, I'm interested in what state departments are doing to help teens in this crucial area of their lives.

## Purpose of this Study

This study looks at the communication efforts state departments of transportation and departments of motor vehicles are doing to market safe driving to teens. The purpose of this study is to find out what's currently being done and evaluate its appropriateness for the audience.

In the first part of this paper, I will show what's currently available from these departments. In the second part, I will rhetorically analyze two pieces using ethos, pathos, and logos: one that is effective with its message and one that is not.

The effectiveness, i.e., whether the communication pieces succeed in changing behavior is not discussed in this paper.

By showing what's currently available and analyzing its effectiveness, I hope to raise awareness of the current opportunities still available to reach teens about safe driving and to help people interested in creating materials for teens develop an appropriate persuasive piece.

## **Background Information**

This study focuses on two things: 1) what communication pieces are currently available from state agencies, and 2) strategies for creating appropriate communications pieces for teens.

The study looks at materials found on department of transportation and department of motor vehicle websites for all 50 states.

## **Previous studies**

The National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration funded a study called *Increasing Teen Safety Belt Use: A Program and Literature Review* by James C. Fell, Tara Kelley Baker, et al. published in 2005 (1).

The researchers did a comprehensive review of programs and reports—over 270 documents—to see what strategies were most effective in increasing teen seatbelt use. They found that an integrated approach of community programs and enforcement seemed to be the most effective.

Lulu Rodriguez conducted a literature review and evaluation of highway safety campaigns with a media component (2). She found that communication pieces alone usually don't change people's behaviors. However, in recent years media have become a more trusted source of information due to cultural changes, so there's good reason to think that communication and media can help change behaviors.

To my knowledge, no study has been conducted that reviewed marketing safety efforts by state agencies to teens.

## **Procedure**

For this study I did a web search for each state's department of transportation, initially thinking that that would be the most likely place for teen safety communication pieces to be. I scanned the homepage for safety information, special teen-specific safety links, and searched for the office responsible for safety. If I didn't find anything (and it seemed like I usually didn't), then I did a search for "teen drivers" or "young drivers" on the site to make sure I hadn't overlooked something or simply looked in the wrong place.

If I still didn't find anything communicating to teen drivers, then I looked for the driver services website, usually by an internet search for that state's department of motor vehicles. Here I repeated the process of scanning for safety information on the homepage, digging through web pages that seemed likely to have communication pieces for teen drivers, like under "safety" or "new drivers" or linked from licensing information. If I didn't find anything, then I did a site-specific search for "teen drivers" or "young drivers" as before.

Once I found a web page related to teen drivers, I copied the link location into my spreadsheet and a brief description of the type of information, like tips, fact sheet, teen website, brochures, etc. I also looked for contact information and included an email address or phone number where available. If no specific contact were available, I included the department's toll free phone number.

Some states had more than one website: one from each department or a non-profit website associated with the department's website (not simply a list of resource links, though).

After searching all 50 states, I looked through my descriptions and categorized the available materials as

- marketing
- informational
- contest.

Here's a further description of how I determined the categories.

## **Marketing**

I considered materials marketing if they paid special attention to the teen audience and attempted to influence behavior by persuasive or more informal/conversational text and teen-specific images. The line was definitely blurry, though, and some sites are more "marketing-ish" than others that might only have a few uses of direct address, like "you" to the teen driver.

Within the marketing category, I was particularly interested in websites developed for a teen audience and marked those with the additional category of "teen web." These websites had a teen-specific visual design different from the design of other parts of the department's website.

## **Informational**

Informational materials were fact sheets, reports, strategic plans, tips that weren't teen-specific, and general licensing information.

## **Contests**

A few states had contests going on specifically for teens. I didn't include contests that were long over. I felt these were more campaign-oriented than communication pieces. And since

the information would only be available on the web for a limited time, I didn't include them in the marketing category, though some would argue they should be.

## Study Limitations

Even though I did my best to thoroughly search state websites for teen-related safety information, it's possible I missed links and information provided by some states. Because I used the Internet as my means of gathering data and didn't supplement with surveys, it's also possible that states have materials that aren't listed on their websites, such as brochures or posters that are available if the office is contacted.

Or they might be supporting websites developed by other organizations that weren't linked from the department's website.

This study also doesn't determine effectiveness of changing behavior through these communication pieces. More research is needed to determine how effective these pieces are and their ROI.

## Results

Overall, 19 states or 38% had either teen marketing or teen contests available online.

Sixteen of the fifty states (32%) had print or web marketing materials. Of those 16 states that had marketing materials, 9 (56%) were further marked with the "teen web" designation because of teen-specific websites. The teen websites were 18% of all state materials.

Some states had both an informational site, i.e. stats, reports, licensing available and a marketing website. Only the marketing website is listed. Table 1 lists the teen websites created by states. Non-profit initiatives were not included in this list.

**Table 1. Nine states had teen-specific safety websites as of 10/1/07**

<i>State</i>	<i>Teen website</i>
Virginia	<a href="http://www.dmv.state.va.us/webdoc/general/safety/youngdriver/index.asp">http://www.dmv.state.va.us/webdoc/general/safety/youngdriver/index.asp</a>
Texas	<a href="http://www.dot.state.tx.us/services/traffic_operations/underage_drinking.htm">http://www.dot.state.tx.us/services/traffic_operations/underage_drinking.htm</a>
Utah	<a href="http://highwaysafety.utah.gov/teenDriving.html">http://highwaysafety.utah.gov/teenDriving.html</a> (under development)
California	<a href="http://www.dmv.ca.gov/teenweb/index.htm">http://www.dmv.ca.gov/teenweb/index.htm</a>
Colorado	<a href="http://www.coloradodrivetime.com/">http://www.coloradodrivetime.com/</a>
Idaho	<a href="http://www.xtr4.com/index.html">http://www.xtr4.com/index.html</a>
Kansas	<a href="http://www.ksdot.org/burtrafficsaf/teen/teenhome.asp">http://www.ksdot.org/burtrafficsaf/teen/teenhome.asp</a>
Missouri	<a href="http://www.modot.org/safety/YoungDrivers.htm">http://www.modot.org/safety/YoungDrivers.htm</a>
Pennsylvania	<a href="http://www.dmv.state.pa.us/crossroads/index.html">http://www.dmv.state.pa.us/crossroads/index.html</a>

**Table 2. Seven other states had marketing material but not teen websites as of 10/1/07**

Maryland	<a href="http://www.mva.state.md.us/DriverServ/ROOKIEDRIVER/default.htm">http://www.mva.state.md.us/DriverServ/ROOKIEDRIVER/default.htm</a> , <a href="http://www.sha.state.md.us/safety/younger_driving.asp">http://www.sha.state.md.us/safety/younger_driving.asp</a>
Illinois	<a href="http://www.dot.state.il.us/trafficsafety/safety_tips.pdf">http://www.dot.state.il.us/trafficsafety/safety_tips.pdf</a>
Maine	<a href="http://www.maine.gov/mdot/safety-programs/flash-facts.php">http://www.maine.gov/mdot/safety-programs/flash-facts.php</a>
Massachusetts	<a href="http://www.mass.gov/rmv/jol/drivingTips.htm">http://www.mass.gov/rmv/jol/drivingTips.htm</a>
Minnesota	<a href="http://www.dps.state.mn.us/ots/teens/default.asp">http://www.dps.state.mn.us/ots/teens/default.asp</a>
Montana	<a href="http://www.mdt.mt.gov/safety/ys%5Fdrivers.shtml">http://www.mdt.mt.gov/safety/ys%5Fdrivers.shtml</a>
Oregon	<a href="http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/TS/youthsafety.shtml#Team_Safety_Page">http://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/TS/youthsafety.shtml#Team_Safety_Page</a>

## Contests

Contests are a closely related category, though its limited availability online or lack of web-available participation makes it a separate category. As shown in table 3, three states, or 6% overall, had contest information about current or recently completed contests. States where I found press releases about contests completed more than a year ago were not included.

**Table 3. Three states had current or recently completed contests**

Georgia	<a href="http://www.gahighwaysafety.org/teendriverparent.html">http://www.gahighwaysafety.org/teendriverparent.html</a>
Iowa	<a href="http://sweetridecontest.com">http://sweetridecontest.com</a>
Rhode Island	<a href="http://www.dot.state.ri.us/programs/safety/contest.html">http://www.dot.state.ri.us/programs/safety/contest.html</a>

## Rhetorical Analysis of Two Teen Safety Websites

It's one thing to create a website for teens, and it's another to make that website appropriate, and I'll say, effective, though as far as I know, long-term evaluations have not been done. I'll look at two examples, one that's effective and one that has room for improvement.

### Crossroads: Pennsylvania Department of Motor Vehicles

Crossroads is a website (<http://www.dmv.state.pa.us/crossroads/index.html>) with “stories about drivers just like you” and short quizzes after each section. Figure 1 is the homepage.

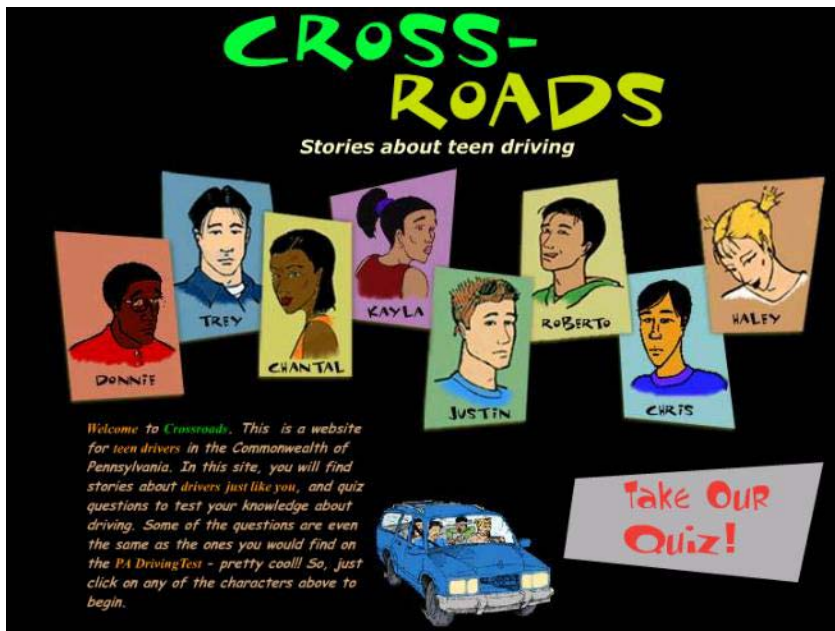


Figure 1. Crossroads homepage

As you can see from the homepage, the visual design is radically different from the rest of the motor vehicle website. In fact, the global navigation for the other parts of the website isn't available. The bright colors against the black background, playful font, and cartoon-ish characters give it a young, though not childish feeling.

Each character has a story that involves some kind of accident while they're driving. Notice the variety of ethnicities that help teens from different backgrounds connect with the character.

Five of the eight stories are told in cartoon-strip style. Users rollover buttons on the bottom to read the text. The other three stories are told audibly with moving text but no pictures. Each character's story focuses on a single aspect of safe driving. Only Donnie's story has a death (told audibly with text).

Here's Haley's story. Earlier in the strip, we see her and several friends getting the car after a football game. There's some small talk about what they should do next, what they want to listen to, etc. Between figures 2 and 3 is a scene with the passengers telling her to watch out for the truck. Figure 4 shows what she's learned. Figure 5 is a question from the quiz.

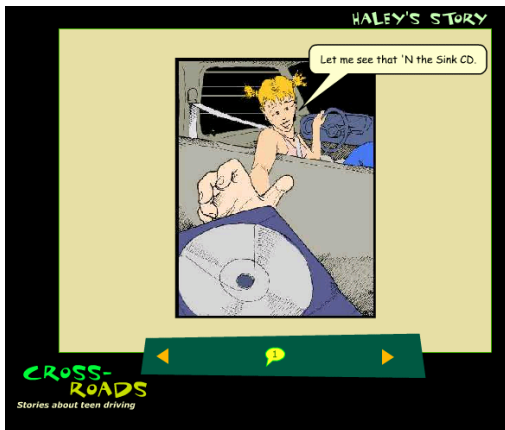


Figure 2. Haley reaches in backseat for CD.

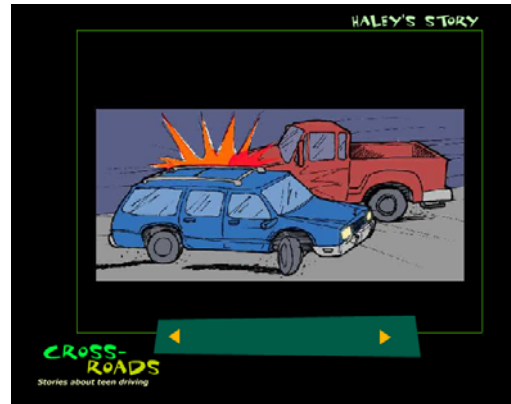


Figure 3. Haley drifts into the other lane and causes a collision.

**THAT WAS INTENSE...**  
 ONE SECOND, I WAS GETTING A CD, AND THE NEXT ALL MY FRIENDS AND I WERE IN AN ACCIDENT.

NOW, I NEVER NEVER MESS AROUND WITH GETTING MUSIC TO LISTEN TO WHILE I'M DRIVING. I WAIT UNTIL I'M PULLED OVER AND STOPPED TO MESS WITH THE CD PLAYER.

TAKING YOUR **FOCUS OFF THE ROAD** FOR EVEN A FEW SECONDS CAN LEAD TO A CRASH.

THE SAME GOES FOR EATING, OR THINGS LIKE **FIXING YOUR HAIR.**

Figure 4. Haley recounts what she's learned from her crash.

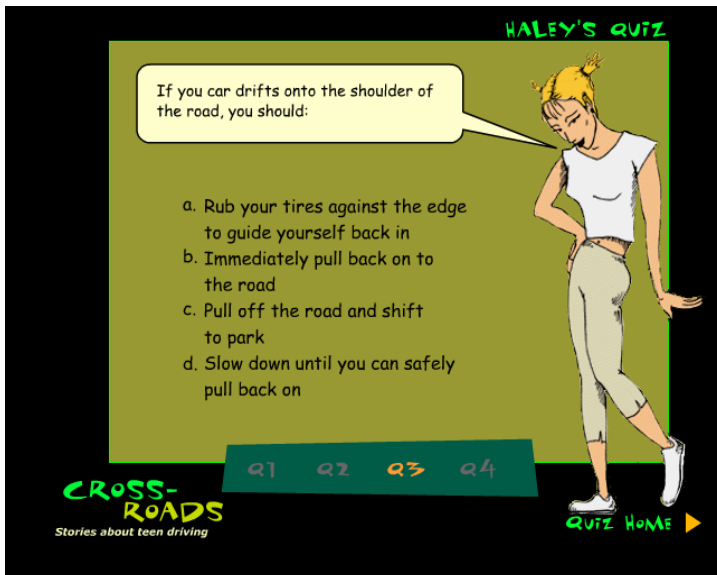


Figure 5. One of Haley's quiz questions, related to her drifting crash.

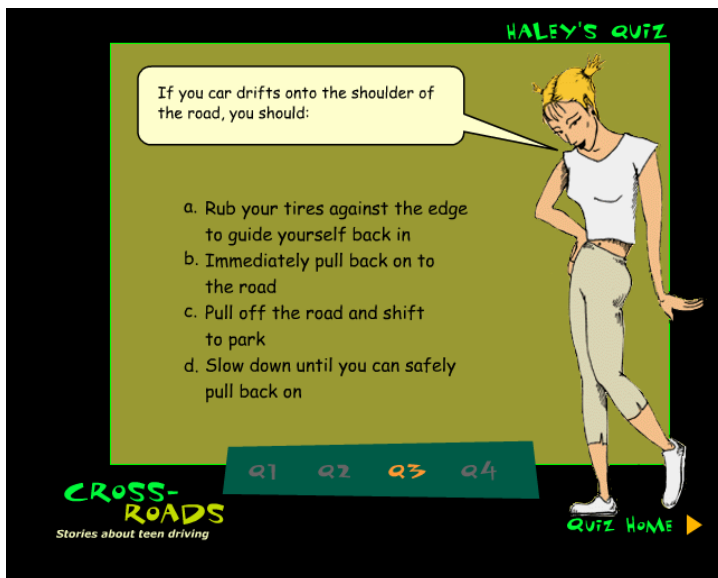


Figure 5. One of Haley’s quiz questions, related to her drifting crash.

Notice that the safety lesson is clear and not preachy. It feels like it’s from a fellow teen. The quiz is also easy to understand and helps teach how to safely recover from drifting without making the test taker feel like they should have read the manual before the test.

The stories on the site are interesting and feel realistic. They teach simple lessons without feeling didactic or condescending and are told without being overly dramatic. The clearness of the messages and entertaining way they’re told make this site especially appropriate for teens.

### **Ethos, Pathos, and Logos**

Another way to look at the effectiveness of this website is through ethos, pathos, and logos, the persuasive triangle defined by Aristotle. Ethos is a credibility appeal. Pathos is an appeal to the emotions, and logos is an appeal to a person’s logic.

#### *Ethos*

The site is credible based on its teen-friendly visual design. It’s well made and created by a reliable source (the Department of Motor Vehicles). The safety lessons are given through characters that teens would find credible, that is, people like them. It’s well known that teens are persuaded by their peers, so using a teen appeal adds to the safety message’s ethos.

#### *Pathos*

The pathos comes from the stories that the characters tell. They all get in crashes and are “woken up”, so to speak by these experiences to dangerous driving. They talk about being scared; we see the crashes. The audio and text-based stories have strong pathos as well by telling of dramatic crashes that changed their lives.

### Logos

The logical appeal comes through the quizzes. After each answer, the character says something like, “if you think about it, it just makes sense that driving a lot of friends around can be distracting.” They appeal to teens’ common sense and logic about how best to react to safety situations.

Overall, this site is an effective and appropriate way to deliver safety messages to teens online. It’s lighthearted enough to be engaging. The design is friendly and energetic. The text is informal without trying to sound too cool. The variety of characters can appeal to teens with various backgrounds. It successfully addresses ethos, pathos, and logos to create a persuasive and memorable message.

### XTR4: Idaho Department of Transportation

XTR4 is a website for “driver-related fun and knowledge” developed by the Idaho Department of Transportation (<http://www.xtr4.com/index.html>). See the homepage in figure 6.

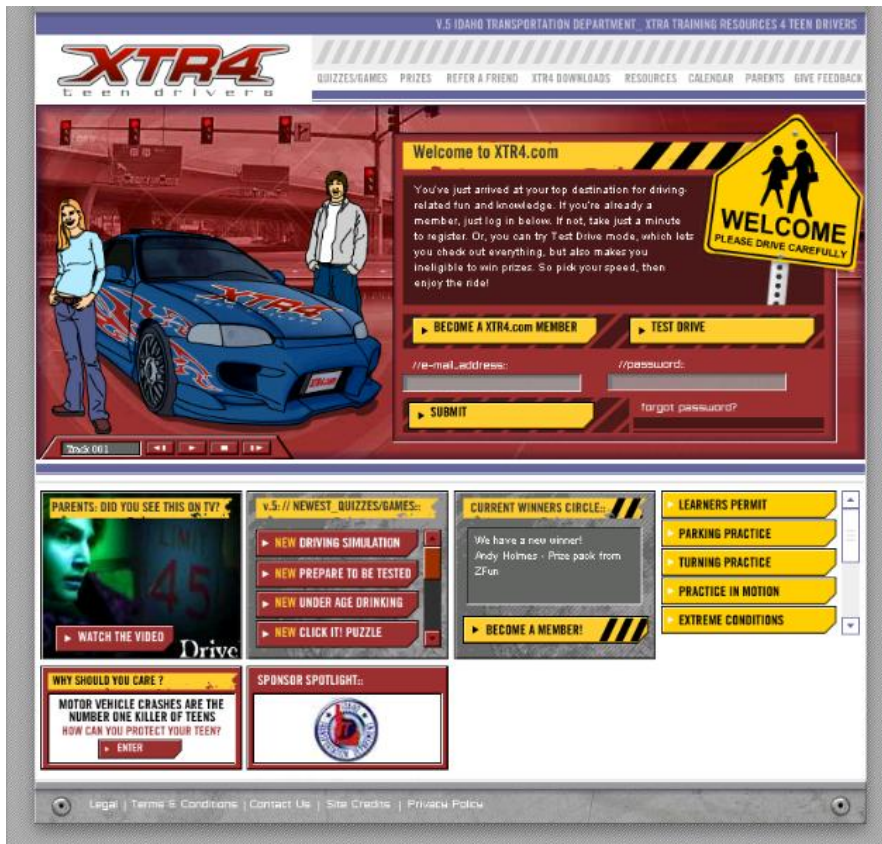


Figure 6. XTR4 homepage.

The design of this homepage is certainly different from the Idaho Department of Transportation's website and is designed to be visually appealing to teens. The animations, the music, and informal text all reach out to a teen audience.

I found, though, as I spent more time on the site, that it seemed to be more male-centric than female, despite the adolescent girl on the homepage. Using race cars, dark grays and maroons, and even the XTR4 graphic is something you would expect on a male video game. The text at times also reinforced this male-centric idea with words like "jock" even though the text attempted to be gender-neutral by avoiding "he" and "him."

The purpose of this site is not as clear. It looks on the surface to be about safety but I later got the impression that it was primarily to help teens (boys?) pass the licensing test. The site also has several "just-for-fun" games without an identifiable purpose besides encouraging repeat users. Figure 7 is the underage drinking section (notice the demographic shown). Figure 8 shows one of the quiz questions.



Figure 7. The underage drinking section doesn't give safety information but dives right into the quiz.

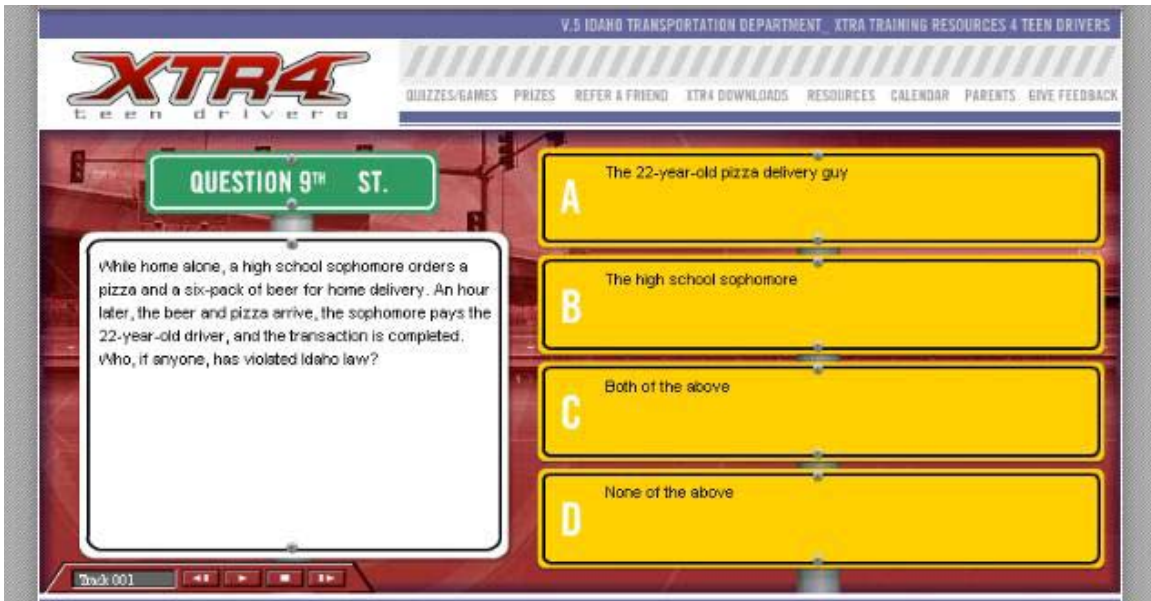


Figure 8. The situation posed in the question is about whether it's illegal for a high school (boy?) to order a six-pack of beer. It's not about driving.

XTR4 has several games that could take advantage of game-based learning, but instead seem to be just for fun. Figure 9 shows the Tetris-based game. Figure 10 shows game where you try to put the picture back together in as few clicks as possible. Is this subtly trying to remind teens to buckle up? I'm not sure.



Figure 9. Tetris-based puzzle

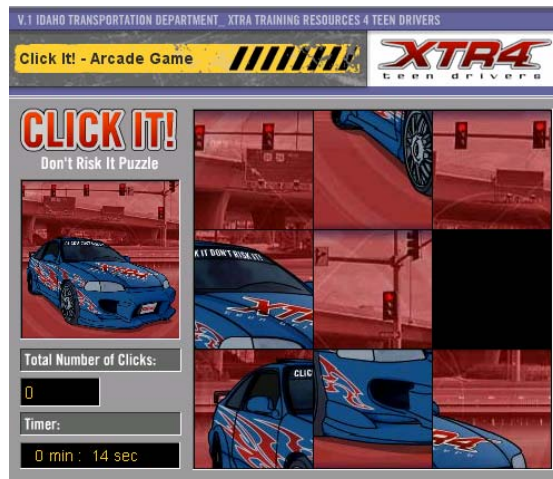


Figure 10. Click it puzzle

XTR4 also has driving simulations where you use the arrow keys to park the car and make turns. Again, this implies that the site is geared toward helping teens pass the test and not seriously trying to affect safety.

To be fair, it's possible that the site was never intended to help teens be more safe drivers. But then I wonder why the site wasn't just focused on being a driver's license practice test. The specifically safety-related information is geared towards parents. The video about teen driver safety is titled with "Parents, did you see this on tv?" A stat about teen fatalities is captioned with "how can you protect your teen?" So the site is concerned about teen safety but has chosen to address it through law memorization for teens and subtle game messages and give the more direct information to parents.

This website looks like it was a substantial investment, and it seems like a missed opportunity to avoid giving practical safety information to teens.

### *Ethos*

The prominent placement of the Idaho Department of Transportation at the top of the website marks this site as a credible resource. The visual design is professional and tailored to a teen audience. However, the male-centric design may cause a loss of credibility for some female teens. The tone used in the text and the quiz questions is often humorous, which would appeal to teens and is trying to be non-threatening.

### *Pathos*

There is little pathos on this site. The video, which has a significant amount of pathos is specifically directed to parents, discouraging teens to take a look.

### *Logos*

This site is primarily logos. The quiz questions are trying to impart the head knowledge necessary to be a safe and law-abiding driver. However, they tend to be difficult or ones that feel like they come straight from the manual—not about safe driving practices.

Overall, this site would most likely appeal to teens and may subtly impart safety messages but doesn't take advantage of the three parts of persuasion to really make an attempt to change behavior, or even attitudes.

## **Conclusion**

Teen driver websites are a great opportunity for new drivers to learn safe driving practices, especially if they're linked from the motor vehicles department where a teen may go to apply for a driver's license or learn more about graduated driver's licensing restrictions.

To be considered marketing safety to teens, the site should include a teen-friendly design and informal text. But as we saw in the two analyzed examples, these two traits alone don't make an effective communication message. Using the classical persuasive elements of ethos, pathos, and logos can help state departments develop safety messages that connect to a teen audience.

Making a “cool” and entertaining website is a common goal for communicators trying to appeal to a younger audience, but each part of the website should also contribute to the site’s goal.

Telling stories from a teen’s point of view without turning the whole site into a scare tactic (though a certain amount of fear is useful) can be a powerful way to incorporate ethos and pathos into a safety site. Appealing to teens’ common sense seems to be an effective way to include logos in safety messages.

Keeping the messages clear and direct is a way to make them memorable (think of advertising). If the message is muddled or cryptic, then teens are less likely to take anything away from the experience.

Finally, teenagers appreciate being treated with respect and as individuals with power over their own lives, so safety messages should be directed to them rather than only to a parent or adult.

## References

1. Fell, J. C., T. Kelley Baker, A. S. McKnight, K. Brainard, E. Langston, R. Rider, D. Levy, J. Grube. *Increasing Teen Safety Belt Use: A Program and Literature Review*. NHTSA, U.S. Department of Transportation, Sep. 2005.
2. Rodriguez, L. *Communicating Highway Safety: What Works*. Center for Transportation Research and Education, Iowa State University, Feb. 2002.