

Time for drivers to stop passing the buck

By Nicholas Neveling

Impatience, arrogance and a reckless attitude are the qualities that have come to characterize South African road users and experts agree that this mind-set is a major cause of the carnage on SA roads.

“There is this attitude among South African drivers that ‘I am faster and better than you so back off’ which is a huge concern. People need to realise that using the roads is a privilege and not a right,” says Moira Winslow from lobby group Drive Alive.

Johan Jonck from arrivealive.co.za, a website promoting road safety but not affiliated to the official Arrive Alive campaign, agrees.

“There are 6 million vehicle owners and they need to realise that they cannot all drive at maximum speed. But people are so impatient and everyone thinks that they can get from Johannesburg to Durban in six hours,” says Jonck.

Recognizing this, Arrive Alive has built its latest campaign around creating a culture of personal responsibility.

“While the national department most certainly has a significant role to play in improving road safety there is only so much we can do.

“At some point in any road safety campaign, the real power to affect change – and to improve road safety – shifts to the road user personally,” says Wendy Watson, Arrive Alive spokesperson and manager of road safety regulations in the Department of Transport.

The new strategy, entitled “The Value of Human Life”, is hoping to send out a message that that will make road users realise that road deaths are not just statistics, but real people that have lost their lives.

“Our holiday season death tolls have almost become cricket scores – we have lost all sense that those are human beings who have lost their lives on our roads.

“Arrive Alive aims to humanise the victims of accidents and show the loss felt when they are killed or injured in accidents,” says Watson.

It is hoped that “The Value of Human Life” campaign will also overcome one of the major obstacles Arrive Alive has faced since its inception in 1997 – getting its message to reach the broad cross section of the South African population.

“Of all of Arrive Alive’s tasks, communication has to be the most daunting. Our target audience is possibly one of the biggest and broadest: it’s virtually the entire population,

young and old, across all cultural divides and spread out all over the country,” says Watson.

By pushing the campaign on a peer-to-peer basis, it will touch on the universal feeling of loss experienced when losing a loved one. It is hoped that this will cut across the demographic splits that have hindered Arrive Alive in the past.

“We hope to inculcate the belief that the death toll is not a statistic: it is real people who have been killed – and usually for something as petty as getting to a destination ten minutes earlier,” says Watson.

Arrive Alive has opted to steer away from the “zero-tolerance” approach and strategies that use shock tactics to change attitudes and behaviour.

Watson acknowledges that in other countries shock tactics have seen a reduction in road deaths, but said that given South Africa’s violent past it was found that most South Africans were immune to images of human suffering, which would render a shock strategy ineffective in South Africa.

The “zero-tolerance” method was also rejected, as it is harder to change attitudes when a negative approach is taken.

“This approach would rely heavily on law enforcement to make it succeed – and it would fail every time someone exceeded the speed limit and did not get caught,” Watson explains.

Watson believes that the success of the campaign is vital if the road death toll is to be brought under control, saying that until people’s attitudes change, no road safety campaign will work.

“If we rely on enforcement only to change behaviour, we not only take the power out of the hands of the individual, we will also need to hire one traffic officer for every motorist on the roads – which is simply impossible

“We can have all the education, communication and law enforcement in the world- but our roads will only become safer once each road user accepts personal responsibility for his/her actions every time he/she uses our roads.”

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