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Billboards cause unsafe levels of distraction in 25% of tested drivers

WASHINGTON – A driving study performed by researchers in Denmark found that 25% of all driver glances at roadside advertising were associated with safety buffers of less than 2 seconds to the vehicle ahead, a threshold that previous studies have shown to mark a significantly increased risk of a crash. The authors conclude that the study’s results “show that advertising signs do affect driver attention to the extent that road safety is compromised.”

The research was performed in an instrumented car equipped with a camera system to track eye glances, a GPS to monitor speed and a laser scanner to measure distances to other vehicles in traffic ahead of the test car. Researchers asked the volunteer drivers (male and female, ages 23-70) to drive a route that took them past 16 static billboards. Drivers were not told of the purpose of the study. Using the eye tracking system they measured driver glances at advertising, and using the GPS and laser scanner they measured the “safety buffer” between the driver and the car ahead.

In addition to 25% of tracked glances being associated with the reduced safety buffer of less than 2 seconds to the vehicle ahead, during 17 of the 109 test drives a driver made single or successive glances to billboards for 2 seconds or longer within a 6-second window. Previous studies have established that when a driver looks away from the road ahead for a total of at least 2 seconds within a 6-second period, the risk of being involved in a crash or near-crash doubles (Klauer et al 2006)¹. 11 of the 32 test drivers exceeded the 2 second threshold at some point during their drives, meaning that approximately every third test driver exhibited visual distraction. “The impact of advertising signs seems to apply to a substantial part of all road users,” said the study’s authors.

“This study offers more evidence that billboards are an unsafe distraction to drivers,” said Mary Tracy, president of Scenic America. “Combined with other recent studies from Sweden, Canada, England and elsewhere, there is a growing body of evidence that roadside advertising negatively affects traffic safety.”

The study was performed by Trafitec, a Danish firm that provides research, development and consultancy services in the area of road safety, traffic management and traffic planning with specific expertise in driver behavior. The peer-reviewed study was first presented at the 3rd International Conference on Driver Distraction and Inattention, September 4-6, 2013, in Gothenburg, Sweden.

Click here to download the study:

<http://www.scenic.org/storage/PDFs/denmark%20driver%20distraction%20study.pdf>

For more information contact Max Ashburn, Scenic America communications director, at 202.463.1294 or ashburn@scenic.org

Scenic America is the only national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing the visual character of America's roadways, communities and countryside.

¹ <http://www.distraction.gov/research/PDF-Files/The-100-Car-Naturalistic-Driving-Study.pdf>