

Communication Arts

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From public intervention to public policy

In 1997, while New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani crowed about a declining murder rate and various quality-of-life improvements, the number of pedestrian fatalities was rising. Every 27 minutes someone in the city was struck by a motor vehicle.

To memorialize the victims and raise awareness of this crisis, ad man Harris Silver and a couple of friends took to the street—literally—to the pavement wherever someone had been killed by an automobile, painting an outline of a collapsed body along with the victim's name and date of death.

Silver has since founded Citystreets, a nonprofit organization focused on pedestrian rights and safety issues in New York City.

Citystreets (<http://citystreets.org/>) is run out of the office of Think Tank 3, a creative agency Silver founded with creative director Sharoz Makarechi in 2002. Think Tank 3 is a full-service agency that does everything from marketing strategy to full campaigns, graphic design, production and buying media.

Accordingly, Citystreets's campaign for pedestrian rights crosses many media: print design, video, intervention in the streets and good old-fashioned face-to-face lobbying.

While the stencil project has not directly impacted public policy, the idea has become viral. "We know of stencil campaigns in Atlanta, San Francisco, Vancouver, Amsterdam and Sydney," says Makarechi. "Every now and then we get a call—someone's cousin was struck by a car and they want to put down a stencil." Over 200 outlines have been painted in New York City alone.

Citystreets does not just criticize the city, they have analyzed data identifying the intersections with the worst fatality rates, and graphed out solutions and recommendations. They have met with the Department of Transportation, testified before the city council, and briefed all the mayoral candidates on their findings.

As creative professionals, Citystreets offered a critical assessment of the city's communications campaigns. They found that almost all the city's safety advertisements were geared towards preventing drunk driving. While needed, Silver noted that only twenty percent of traffic accidents in New York City result from drunk driving. Citystreets proposed a broader messaging campaign to encourage drivers to drive responsibly and turn more safely across pedestrian crosswalks.

They have also tracked the astonishing increase in cycling fatalities in recent years. The most [continued on page 23]

common, and often deadly, injury to cyclists is being hit by a car door opened suddenly in the path of the moving cyclist.

Citystreets designed an elegant warning sticker to post on the passenger doors of all New York City taxis. Transparent, save the thin sans-serif type, the sticker quietly asks passengers to please look for cyclists before opening the door. The stickers cost pennies to produce per vehicle and their implementation would only require a directive from the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission that regulates 35,000 vehicles on the streets of New York.

They presented their idea to the Commission, even offering to pay for printing the stickers, but the Commission declined, responding, "We do not believe stickers are an effective means of communication." This is rather absurd, since the Commission itself requires every taxi to display a range of stickers and information to the passenger: a city map, the driver's license number, the flat fare from JFK and a Taxi Rider's Bill of Rights.

Again, Citystreets took matters into their own hands and called on the public to participate. They printed the stickers themselves and distributed them to supporters for free along with a page of information on the issue, and the address of the Taxi and Limousine Commission.

It's too soon to tell whether there have been fewer accidents, but the grassroots pressure has had some effect: in May 2003, the Taxi and Limousine Commission announced a new Taxi Rider's Bill of Rights sticker with pictograms warning riders to exit curb side and to watch for cyclists. The design is not as elegant or prominent as the Citystreets design, but it's a start.

While Citystreets has no formal membership structure, they do have a loose network of supporters that attend events and participate in actions, as well as informal links with related organizations around the world. "If people want to get involved they should just e-mail us. It's easy to adopt the stencil project to raise awareness," says Makarechi.

Drawing connections between Think Tank 3 and Citystreets, Makarechi notes, it's all about design. "We do design and strategic thinking about design. We are urbanists. We care about cities and about how people live. We care about our environment. We are not anti-car, but are looking at how streets are designed." She adds, "We live in a city, we can make it better, and we know how."