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CANADIANS SPLIT ON EXTENDING CELLPHONE BAN AT THE WHEEL: SURVEY

TORONTO, November 3, 2009 – As Ontario became the latest province last week to ban drivers from using hand-held cellphones while at the wheel, a TNS Canadian Facts survey suggests that consumers are divided about whether the ban should be extended to include hands-free devices.

“Half of Canadians would support a more comprehensive ban, but the attitudes along generational lines are really striking. Older Canadians are far more supportive of a total ban than their younger, multi-tasking counterparts,” said Michael Ennamorato, executive vice-president at TNS Canadian Facts.

“There are significant generational differences when it comes to the perceived safety of hands-free devices, and older Canadians are clearly skeptical when it comes to this issue.”

The TNS study found that nearly six in 10 Canadians (58%) aged 50 and older would support a total ban on cellphone usage while driving, compared with just three in 10 (27%) between the ages of 18 and 24.

Regionally, support for banning hands-free cellphone usage while driving is lowest in provinces that do not have laws prohibiting the use of hand-held devices while at the wheel. Just 44 per cent of Canadians living in the Prairies say they support a comprehensive ban, compared to 55 per cent of residents of Quebec, a jurisdiction where the use of hand-held electronic devices while driving has been unlawful since April 2008.

British Columbia plans to ring in the New Year with a similar ban on hand-held devices, and an equal proportion of residents there (55%) would favour a total ban on cellphone use while driving. In Ontario, 47 per cent of residents hold this view.

Many Canadians are prepared, however, to comply with the type of legislation that has been introduced. The survey found that 42 per cent of drivers who use a cellphone say their phone has a hands-free mode or they have purchased a hands-free device for their vehicle. Fully 17 per cent plan to get one soon while 39 per cent have no intention of acquiring a hands-free phone or accessory, in some cases because they have no intention of using any mobile device while behind the wheel.

There is certainly evidence that the introduction of legislation, and possibly the standard of social acceptance that is implicit in the initiative, can accelerate change. Ontario has the highest proportion of drivers who plan to get a hands-free device (22%), a decision that is no doubt influenced by the law introduced in the province last week. Quebec and the Atlantic provinces, where bans on holding electronic devices while driving already exist in many cases, have the highest incidence of hands-free device ownership. Gravitating to the new hands-free standard is evidently more palatable than eschewing mobile conversation altogether while driving.

When asked about the application of current or proposed driving bans, opinions vary by province, but nowhere is there anything approaching a universal belief that such laws will be comprehensively enforced. Ontario represents the positive extreme, with almost two-thirds of people (65%) expressing the belief that the police will enforce the new law. This is likely attributable to the publicity surrounding its very recent launch.

Canadians give more credit to police, though, in enforcing bans than they do to drivers in obeying them. In Quebec, slightly over one-third of residents (36%) think that motorists are complying with the law in their province. Those in other provinces are more pessimistic about the willingness of motorists to obey.

“Distracted driving began long before cellphones, Blackberries and GPS units were available to consumers, although the problem seems to be more acute today,” said Ennamorato. “And there is a sense among Canadian drivers that motorists who cling to their hand-held electronic devices while at the wheel are not about to break their habit anytime soon, even when laws require them to do so.”

For the study, a national sample of Canadian adults was randomly selected from TNS Canadian Facts’ Internet research panel and invited to complete an online survey. In total, 1,007 consumers completed the questionnaire between October 22 and 27, 2009. The survey data were then weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the Canadian population aged 18 years and older.

TNS Canadian Facts (www.tns-cf.com) is one of Canada's most prestigious full-service marketing, opinion and social research organizations.

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