

Shifting **RIGHT** overnight

On September 2, 1967, Swedes drove on the left side of the road, as always. The next morning, they switched sides. **PHIL MORLEY** from MerchantCantos reports

A FEW MONTHS BACK I BECAME INTRIGUED by the escalators at Holborn tube station in London. London Underground, in an effort to improve efficiency, was having a terrible time persuading commuters to stand on both sides of the escalator, altering the lifelong habit of standing on one side to let people pass.

That prompted me to research other significant change-management operations, and it turns out that this autumn represents the 50th anniversary of a classic example: the day that Sweden switched from left- to right-hand driving.

Sweden had been a left-hand drive culture since about 1736. (Yes, traffic laws governed horse riders too.) However, its neighbors, including Norway, Denmark and Finland, drove on the right. In defiance of the opposite-steering-wheel rule, about 90 percent of Swedes drove left-hand drive vehicles (due to the fact that Swedish manufacturers made cars mainly for the export market). With drivers positioned near the side of the road rather than near oncoming traffic, limited visibility led to many head-on collisions. And drivers crossing into Sweden got into accidents because of their unfamiliarity with its traffic protocols.

The Swedish Government prepared a case to make the switch and in 1955 offered a referendum. Some 83 percent of the population voted to keep driving on the left. But in a shining example of democracy, the government made the change anyway.

In 1963 it mandated that a move to right-hand traffic would take place in 1967. Four years to get it right. The target date of September 3, 1967, became known as H-Day. H stood for Högertrafik, Swedish for “right traffic.”

Traffic lights had to be reversed. Some 360,000 road signs had to be switched. Intersections had to be redesigned and reshaped, lines on the road repainted, bus stops moved, trams reconfigured.

Every intersection was equipped with an extra set of poles and traffic signals wrapped in black plastic, awaiting the switch. Similarly, a parallel set of lines were painted on the roads with white paint, then covered with black tape.

The communications strategy was impressive.

The day got not only a name but a logo, which appeared on everything from milk cartons to underwear. A televised song contest gave first prize to The Telstars for “Håll dig till höger, Svensson” (“Keep to the right, Svensson”). The government even distributed gloves, one black, one red as a reminder to drivers.

On H-Day at 4:50am, crowds of people gathered to watch as all vehicles on the road were instructed to come to a halt, move carefully to the other side of the road and wait. At the stroke of 5:00am, following a radio countdown, an announcement was made over the radio: “Sweden now has right-hand driving.” And so it did.

Accidents dropped in the following months, in



Central Stockholm on Dagen H (“H-Day”), September 3, 1967. It was the day that Swedes, who had always driven on the left-hand side of the road, were required by law to drive on the right side. Roughly 150 minor accidents were reported on H-Day, but the move saw a long-term decline in car accidents. Perhaps terrified drivers were paying more attention.

part because of improved vision while passing.

When you consider that this change was orchestrated without the communication tools we take for granted today, I say: respect to the Swedes.

In my work at MerchantCantos, I have helped global businesses undertake major change programs using some of the same tools: a creative platform with a name, logo, look and feel, and an informed plan to deliver a set of simple core messages coherently across an informed range and sequence of channels. I am proud to say the projects have included some innovative, poignant and successful behavioral cues to influence, reinforce and sustain the desired change.

As yet, though, I haven’t made up a song.

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