

# Don't Mess with Texas

No doubt you've seen, heard, and probably even said these words -- but you may be surprised at how our state's unofficial motto came to be.

As Texans, when we have a problem our pioneering spirit leads us to take matters into our own hands and fix it. So that's exactly what our State Department of Highways and Public Transportation (now the Texas Department of Transportation, or TXDOT) did about three decades ago when they recognized a growing problem: litter along our state's highways. And they found a solution in the "Don't Mess with Texas" campaign.

In the 1980s, the majestic sprawling landscapes for which our state is known were becoming cluttered with fast food wrappers, ice cream cups, and almost anything else you can imagine.

Traditional marketing campaigns that connected littering with guilt and shame weren't working on the 'typical litterer' of the time, identified by the agency as an 18-35 year old male. By 1985, Texas was spending more than \$20 million on highway cleanup, and it was estimated that number would increase by as much as 15 percent each year in the future.

Texas had a problem, and so the search for a solution began.

When Austin advertising mogul Tim McClure pitched the "Don't Mess with Texas" campaign to the State Department of Highways and Public Transportation, the older participants in the room expressed their doubts. This only encouraged Tim -- they weren't his target audience. He continued to push his idea, and they eventually gave him a chance.

The slogan first debuted across the state with a few slow-to-sell bumper stickers in 1985, but a television ad with the slogan featuring Stevie Ray Vaughan during the 1986 Cotton Bowl took the state by storm. The Dept. of Highways and Public Transportation distributed trash cans bearing the catchy slogan across the state's highway grid, and soon bumper sticker sales caught on.

It wasn't long before the slogan went viral and celebrities were asking to be a part of the anti-litter campaign. Willie Nelson, George Foreman, and Chuck Norris are just three of the iconic Texans who have lent their fame to our state's cleanup efforts.

Thirty years later, TXDOT now hosts an annual "Don't Mess with Texas" highway clean-up day in April to commemorate the anniversary of the campaign. Boy Scouts can earn a special badge for participating, and students can earn college scholarships for leadership efforts to clean our highways.

And not only has Tim McClure's slogan become an iconic Texas saying, his creative solution has been wildly successful. In the campaign's first six years, the state recorded a 72 percent reduction in highway litter. According to TXDOT, while the state paid today's equivalent of \$2.21 per Texan in 1985 for roadside cleanup, by 2015 that figure had dropped to \$1.19 -- even with the addition of many more miles of Texas roads.

In addition to inspiring Texans to take action, the viral "Don't Mess with Texas" slogan allows TXDOT to collect royalties on products bearing the phrase, translating to more money for cleanup efforts. All types of items have been emblazoned with the slogan, but one Texan can be particularly proud of is the United States Navy's USS Texas (SSN-775), a Virginia-class submarine which proudly displays the motto on its crest.

After 30 years, the "Don't Mess with Texas" campaign continues with a clear goal in sight: if every Texan picks up just two pieces of trash each month, they estimate our highways will be completely litter-free in a year. That is, as long as fellow drivers don't mess with Texas.

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