

Kaila: It all started with peas and guacamole.

music comes in

Kaila: Back in 2015, The New York Times ran a recipe advocating for peas in guacamole. This naturally created a bit of a stir.

[00:00](#) - We end tonight with war and peas: as battle over the recipe for guacamole.

[00:00](#) - What do you say to the pea haters? I mean, you know, peas aren't for everyone. But if you haven't tried it and you are against it, I would say you should probably taste it and then let me know what you think.

Kaila: But it also gave someone at the Arizona Department of Transportation an idea.

Doug: [00:00:19] My name is Doug Pacey. That's D-O-U-G, P-A-C-E-Y and I'm a spokesperson for the Arizona Department of Transportation. [00:00:27][7.3]

Kaila: Doug took that outcry and turned it into a safety message.

Doug: [00:07:39] drinking and driving goes together like peas and guac [00:07:42][2.9]

Doug: [00:08:00] And it made a splash. It went viral. It generated articles in The New York Times, The Washington Post. I'm pretty sure every Phoenix media outlet covered it, even Tucson, Yuma, Flagstaff around the state because it was different. It was something people hadn't seen before in Arizona highways. [00:08:19][18.3]

Kaila: But it wouldn't be the last time Arizona drivers saw unique and clever messages on their highway signs. After all ... the signs got people talking. Buried within those conversations was an important message.

Doug: [00:08:21] We don't want to say buckle up. Everyone knows you should wear your seat belt, but people still don't do it. About thirty three percent of the people who die every year in Arizona highways, they're not wearing a seatbelt. Thirty three percent, they're speeding. It's the same thing. These are all things we know we shouldn't do. So our goal with these messages is to come at a traffic safety from a different angle, a different way. [00:08:45][24.0]

Kaila: Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions you ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White. In today's episode, we're answering a question from listener Carla Wandelt. Carla asked, "Who writes the fun sayings on the electronic signs on the freeways?"

Kaila: Bringing you that answer is podcast editor Katie O'Connell.

Katie: There's a process behind every message displayed on our highway signs. All of them are vetted and approved ...

Doug: [00:01:17] because everything up there is important to drivers and it's serious and we want them to know that. [00:01:23][6.8]

Katie: That's Doug again. He said there are ... of course ... the standard messages. Messages about travel times or nearby accidents. Severe weather warnings or amber or silver alert warnings.

Doug: [00:02:28] and also nationwide and local statewide safety campaigns, things like move over, motorcycle awareness month, things like that. [00:02:37][8.9]

Katie: Then, there are the clever messages. The funny ones. The ones most likely to make headlines. Just how are those messages created?

music

Katie: There's a person at ADOT who minds the calendar. They pay attention to upcoming holidays — Christmas, Thanksgiving, Fourth of July.

Katie: They'll also look for big pop culture moments. Maybe it's a concert coming to town, like Taylor Swift or Paul McCartney or U2.

Doug: [00:01:47] big acts that everyone has heard of. [00:01:49][2.5]

Katie: Maybe it's a big movie coming out, like a new Marvel movie or another chapter in the "Star Wars" saga. Something easily identifiable.

Doug: [00:02:01] Again, you may not like Star Wars, but you can get the reference. [00:02:06][5.3]

Katie: They've even created unique messages when big shows come to Arizona State University's Gammage Theatre. Shows like "The Lion King" or "Hamilton."

Katie: Doug says there's not a monthly or quarterly meeting about them.

Doug: [00:03:27] there's no big conference room with whiteboards, anything like that. [00:03:31][4.1]

Katie: Instead, Doug said it's a streamlined and digital process. There's one person who is in charge of minding the calendar. They watch for upcoming holidays, big pop culture moments, etc. That person will send out an email to ADOT's communication team asking for pitches.

Doug: [00:04:00] there's no there's no marketing firm. There's no advertising firm. There's no consultants. Everything on the boards is for better or worse. It's created in-house here at ADOT communications. [00:04:14][13.8]

Katie: Everyone on the team has a chance to submit ideas. From those drafts ... anywhere from four to six start making their way up the chain of command.

Doug: [00:04:49] And then they go to the director's office here at DOT and they're approved usually one, sometimes two, but usually one. [00:04:55][6.3]

Katie: Then messages are scheduled! How long it takes to complete this process varies depending on the topic. But Doug said it's not usual for the whole process to be completed in a day.

music ends

Katie: All of the messages have to follow federal guidelines. They have to be related to traffic, traffic safety or travel information. The message boards can accommodate three lines with 18 characters per line. Commas, spaces, apostrophes and dashes are all included in the character count.

Doug: [00:06:43] It can be difficult, it's really similar to what an old school copy editor would face when they're writing a headline in the physical print newspaper because they have to deal with that limited space. [00:06:56][12.9]

Katie: But the results are memorable.

Doug: [00:09:40] on New Year's Day, I think it was in twenty, seventeen or twenty eight. We put a message up that said New Year new. You use your blinker. And that one was shared, I think 18 or 19 million times on Facebook. [00:09:52][12.2]

Katie: Celebrities like Lin Manuel Miranda, Shania Twain and Cher have posted photos of the signs on social media.

Katie: It turns out that we weren't the first state to do this. Doug said that title belongs to Iowa. But there's a chance we've perfected the art.

Doug: [00:12:18] I'm biased, of course, but I say that because I've seen quite a few of our messages used by other states. Here at ADOT we won't use a message if another state has thought it up or used it. [00:12:30][12.1]

Katie: They've even devised a contest for the signs. Every spring for the last four years, ADOT has invited the public to submit their safety messages.

Doug: [00:13:29] the first year we ran it. It was overwhelming. We were hoping we'd get maybe a thousand entries just so we would have enough to pick 10 or 15 good ones to let the public vote for. [00:13:41][12.8]

Doug: [00:13:42] And I. I think we got about seven or eight thousand entries. [00:13:47][4.3] [17.1]

Katie: Once ADOT staffers sift through all of the entries ... the top 10 to 15 finalists are put online for a vote. And the top two vote getters are the winners.

Doug: [00:14:58] And we have seen we've gotten some really good, good messages from the contest. Like I said, the that's the temperature, not the speed limit. That was the the winner the first year.[00:15:09][10.9]

Doug: [00:14:28] And what we do with the winners is we invite them down to our traffic operations center where they can type in their message, hit, enter, return and see it go live on message boards and our traffic control center. [00:14:38][9.8]

Katie: The entries must fit the federal criteria. Again, that means they can have three lines of text with 18 characters each. It's definitely a test of your creativity.

music

Katie: But it's a test Mitzie Warner was ready for. Mitzie said she'd seen the contest for a few years, but never seemed to make the deadline. Then came 2019.

Mitzie: [00:00:47] I just happened to be watching the news and the deadline was kind of narrowing and I'm like, I got to get on this, I've got to think of something because I really want to win and I really want to go into that traffic center. [00:01:01][14.3]

Katie: [00:01:07] OK, so tell me what your message was and then what? Like how you came up with it. Walk me through your creative process. [00:01:13][6.1]

Mitzie: [00:01:14] OK, well, the message was drive like the person your dog thinks you are and it's obviously a play off, be the person your dog thinks you are. And I just thought that, you know, even on our worst days, our pets see the best in us. So if we can apply those characteristics behind the wheel, that safer driving out there for everyone and I don't know, just kind of clicked. [00:01:40][26.1] [32.1]

Katie: Mitzie submitted her slogan and waited.

Mitzie: [00:01:59] And it was funny because I actually got on to AZ and I just happened to see it said like, vote for your favorite catch phrase or the top two. And I'm like, oh, I really wish that I

could have gotten on there. And then I click on it to see what did get a what did I get on there. And then I saw my catch phrase and I was like, oh, I was so excited. [00:02:21][22.7]

Katie: That's when her competitive instinct kicked in. She sent the voting to her friends and family, blasting it on social media. She was *this* close to her goal.

(musical pause)

Katie: And she'd get it. Mitzie's phrase — drive like the person your dog thinks you are — would make it to our highway's message boards.

music ends

Mitzie: [00:02:54] It was thrilling for me. I love it. I mean, you know, they had like all the different media outlets there, too. So it was like the one day that I actually felt. Like, super important (laughs), and then when I was actually able to type it and then hit that enter button to watch it go live, there was a little bit of a delay. So I was like expecting like ASAP for it to just hit. And then once that once it just went, it was it was it was thrilling. [00:03:24][30.3]

Katie: If you're planning on entering that contest in the future, you'll have competition.

Mitzie: [00:04:31] I have a friend. Her name is Michelle. We've been like texting back and forth possible catchphrases. [00:04:37][5.8]

Mitzie: [00:04:40] We really want to win! [00:04:41][1.0]

Katie: [00:04:42] You're hooked on it, you're hooked on the winning again! (laughs) [00:04:44][2.0]

Katie: At the end of the day ... contestants like Mitzie and the folks at ADOT are able to put their wit to good use.

Doug: [00:02:43] And so if we can tie those traffic safety messages to things already thinking about hopefully the traffic safety message, it resonates a little bit deeper. It lasts a little bit longer, and people engage in that. They take it with them and they make the road safer for themselves, for the people in their vehicles and for everyone else who's on the road with them. [00:03:01][18.4]

theme music comes in

Kaila: So listeners ... if you're competitive like Mitzie, now would be the time to start working on your safety messages. The annual competition comes around every spring, so you've got a running start if you workshop things now.

Kaila: That's all for today. Audio in today's episode comes from CBS Evening News and CNN. Thank you to Carla for submitting this question! If you have a question you'd like us to answer,

let us know. You can send them to us at Valley 101 podcast dot A Z central dot com. Or you can find us on Twitter at Valley101pod.

Kaila: I'm Kaila White, signing off for this week.