

Data Truck Takes Researchers on the Road

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Exterior of the Data Truck research vehicle as it sits near Flagstaff Hill in Oakland. Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University can now go to potential test subjects instead of having them come to CMU.

The Data Truck, a mobile social science lab equipped with eight computer stations and a waiting area, allows the university's Center for Behavioral Decision Research to track how different situations affect peoples' decision making.

George Loewenstein, a CMU professor and committee member of the Center for Behavioral Decision Research, thought up the traveling lab after 9/11.

"We used to ask people in the airport," he said. "After 9/11, you couldn't get past the gate, so we had to go elsewhere for nonstudent subjects."

In operation for about a month, the truck has conducted tests at assisted living facilities, movie theaters, and, last week, Cinema in the Park, a free movie on Flagstaff Hill in Oakland's Schenley Park.

Participants under 18 were presented with a photograph and asked to rate the person's attractiveness, explained Alex Kinzler and Andy Hafenbrack, the CMU undergraduates monitoring the test.

Participants over 18 were presented with two pictures, one from a dating Web site for people with sexually transmitted diseases and one from a regular dating Web site. They were asked to choose which person they believed had an STD and write how confident they were with their answer on a scale of 50 to 100. These participants were rewarded with a quarter for every question guessed correctly.

Bill Holman, a University of Pittsburgh Medical Center employee in his 20s, was being tested for a second time. He was drawn by a pre-movie announcement that snacks would be served.

"I figured I'd see if they had any more food," he joked as his standard schnauzer, Jasz, lounged in the waiting area.

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Alex Kinzler, left, a research assistant and CMU senior majoring in decision science, sets up a computerized study inside the research vehicle. Don Moore, right, director of the Center for Behavioral Decision Research and associate CMU professor, enters the vehicle while a participant, center, completes a questionnaire. The Center for Behavioral Decision Research will use the truck to try and determine how different situations affect peoples' decision making. For example, the truck will park outside a Steelers game to study the affect of alcohol on decision making, and in a low-income neighborhood to test what drives peoples' financial decisions.

Jim Osborn, executive director of the Quality of Life Technologies Center, a joint venture between Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh, said the center will use the truck to test people's reaction to new technology.

"It's best set up for software-based testing as opposed to hardware-based testing," he said, meaning most tests will concern whether someone can more easily work with a program on a PDA or PC instead of how people deal with a new technological device, like a robot.

He said researchers can also test how long it takes someone to learn a new program, and how quickly different age groups can pick up on new programs.

The truck, manufactured by LifeLine Mobile Inc., is 36 feet long with "Research" written down the side in bold, black letters.

The truck and its technology, which includes several PCs that can used outside the truck to handle overflows, are worth about \$250,000, said Mr. Osborn. CMU Provost Mark Kamlet paired up Dr. Loewenstein and Mr. Osborn to utilize a \$500,000 investment from the Pittsburgh Life Sciences Greenhouse. An additional \$15 million grant came from the National Science Foundation.

Pittsburgh Life Sciences Greenhouse will also use the truck. It will visit schools without labs, and has already worked with the McKeesport School System, the Pittsburgh Public School System and the Propel Schools, as well as a Boy Scout jamboree in Latrobe.

"We're trying to get kids interested in math and science," said John Manzetti, president and CEO of Pittsburgh Life Sciences Greenhouse. Planting the seeds for the next generation of scientists "would be a good outcome," he said.