

# **Selling Waste to the Public**

**For the first time since the Second World War, people are being challenged to think about their waste. Encouraging people to change a habit of a lifetime is no easy task and requires far more than a few leaflets.**

**Effective communications has become well recognised as a vital element in local waste strategies with a direct correlation between those councils achieving the highest recycling rate and those that commit to the greatest spend and effort on communications.**

**Stephen Bates takes a look at how the communication process has been used to change people's behaviour towards recycling and how some of the more forward looking councils are taking cues from commercial advertising to bring about change.**

There is a common acronym that professional advertising people adhere to when developing campaigns; AIDA: Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action. It's an approach that remains relevant regardless of the product or service being sold.

When the concept of communicating recycling schemes to residents started about 5 years ago, far too many authorities focused purely on the "awareness" element and even today, the term "awareness campaign" is one that remains worryingly present with many working on what can be referred to as the "Field of Dreams" approach to marketing; "if you build it, they will come" (or in this scenario; "if you supply them boxes, they will use them").

In 2004, Kettering Borough Council was planning a launch of a particularly complex collection scheme. Two new boxes for dry recyclables, a new wheelie bin for garden waste, alternate week collection – very much the full set and this in an area with a particularly high elderly population.

## **INFORMATION**

A campaign was developed that introduced the details of the scheme gradually over a four-week period prior to rollout. Media was deployed across the area and leaflets delivered to households each week, building the level of information provided, all tied together with a very distinct brand identity.

By the time the bins and boxes were delivered, residents were expecting them (Awareness), knew what they were for (Interest), why they were needed (Desire) how to use them and a willingness to do so (Action).

A recycling rate of around 45% is proof that the concept works.

Over the next 5 to 10 years, local authorities face further challenges to continually increase recycling as well as the need to explore new waste processing technologies. With the latter comes the ominous prospect of planning processes involving public consultations – something many areas are already going through.

It's worth noting that public consultation is as much a part of marketing and communications as ads on buses and leaflet drops. Some of the world's largest companies will go through similar exercises before launching new consumer products where the risk of failure could result in large scale job losses and financial ruin. Although such activity is seen as a means of identifying what the customer wants, in reality, the company has a good idea of this anyway and will use it to "sell acceptance" for its new product.

## **TECHNICALITIES**

Of course, councils face different risks. A facility that's inappropriately specified or poorly located can cause public dissatisfaction, which then has wider political ramifications. But it's difficult to communicate the technicalities in a way that the public can fully understand. It's common for waste managers to believe that the public has a similar level of understanding to waste issues as they do. They don't. They produce waste and want rid of it. End of story. So how can this be overcome to get critical planning approval whilst minimising public dissatisfaction? Again, it's worth looking beyond waste;

The name "Sea River Mediterranean" is likely to mean little to most people. That it's the name of a ship will likely have no additional bearing on this. But should you live near to a major shipping port, you might take more interest were you to know that the Sea River Mediterranean is in fact, the ship formally known as the Exxon Valdez, the tanker that spilled 11 million gallons of oil into the sea off the Alaskan coast in 1989.

In warfare, there are no longer "civilian casualties" but the more publicly palatable "collateral damage". Seedy strip clubs have long since made way for the more discerning title of "gentlemen's or lap-dancing club" (both debatable claims but you get the point). And who can forget Ratners, the jewellery retailer whose owner, Gerald Ratner publicly dismissed one of his products as "crap" in 1991. He's still in business today but trading under the Signet brand.

These examples show that by addressing the way in which awkward subjects are presented to the public, negativity can be dramatically reduced. It's wrong though, to assume that it's simply a case of changing a name. There has to be a major shift in the substance of the "offering". Signet doesn't sell "crap". Gentleman's Clubs are no longer seedy dens of the past (apparently!) and the

Sea River Mediterranean is amongst the safest vessels sailing the oceans of the world today.

Waste has changed too. Incinerator and treatment plants look more like modern art galleries and crucially, what can be done with it, has changed. The trouble is, that in the minds of the public, it remains a smelly, dirty subject the disposal of which involves holes, ugly buildings, big chimneys and pollution. So maybe there's an argument to suggest that the whole subject needs to be repackaged for public consumption or, in marketing speak; "rebranded". Should we be using the phrase "waste" at all?

## **TARGETS**

What is clear, is that the need for good public communication strategies are not going to subside. In fact, there is a greater need now than at any time before. Just because a local authority has exceeded its recycling targets, it doesn't mean that they can reduce the level of campaign spend. Again, the commercial sector provides a good example;

Think of Coca-Cola – a brand we all know. A product that we've all tried. We know what it is, what it does and how it does it. Wherever you go in the world, ask for a Coca-Cola and people will understand you. So why then do they continue to spend \$billions each year advertising the product? The reason is quite simple; if they didn't, the public would lose interest in it, forget about it and buy a different product.

If this can happen to the world's strongest and most recognisable brand, imagine the effect reduced campaign activity will have on local recycling.

In time, recycling will become second nature and the processing of residual waste will be straightforward and largely unhindered by public debate. But that remains a Utopia that's a long way off and until we reach it, then good, effective and strategic communications will remain a vital ingredient in bringing about and maintaining behavioural change.

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