

## CIPR Pride Awards

Thames Water entry: Best use of media relations

Company	Thames Water (in-house PR team)
Region	Thames & Chiltern
Campaign	Bin it – don't block it
Award category	Best use of media relations
Cost	£250 for photography, £30 for festive hats (no budget)

### 1. Strategy

It costs Thames Water more than £12m to clear around 55,000 blockages each year. Even worse, 7,000 homes and gardens in London and the Thames Valley flood with sewage annually.

This is a serious problem which affects the entire water industry. As a result, industry messaging, used year after year, has become tired. It needed refreshing to get the attention it deserves.

The Thames Water Press Office did exactly that, taking a creative new approach to highlight the consequences of abusing your drains and encouraging people to take simple steps to prevent blockages.

Objectives:

1. **Devise a fresh new campaign** on an age-old problem, resulting in key messages being picked up by target media (national, London and Thames Valley).
2. **Develop an online presence** to drive website traffic, while embracing social media to raise awareness.
3. **Maximise campaign coverage and avoid repetition** by doing well-timed 'big hits' rather than constantly regurgitating the same stories.
4. **Use traditional PR techniques** – no marketing budget.

### 2. Implementation

Key success factors were:

1. **Timing** – We spread activity out (approximately every six months) to keep the campaign fresh;
2. **Creativity** – We identified stories with a clear news hook and offered something different to whet the media's appetite;
3. **Simplicity** – by not using a budget we made the campaign more authentic and easier for people to relate to. We used our flushers to add the human interest angle which has been pivotal throughout the campaign.

#### Hit 1: The Launch

In August 2009 we devised a customer survey on our website to collect data and launched the campaign on the back of the results. This found 41% of customers admit to flushing unsuitable products down toilets. We coined the term 'sewer abuse'

- a sound bite used widely by media. This was backed up with a news release and proactive media calls to generate interest. We held a 'photocall' in our London sewers - attended by ITV London and the Press Association – and at a blocked manhole in Reading - attended by BBC1 South.

We teamed up with ITV1's primetime show, Grimefighters, which reaches five million viewers per episode. We appeared on five programmes which illustrated sewer abuse in our sewers, sewage works, pumping stations and manholes.

### **Hit 2: Yuletide activity**

In December 2009 the Press Association (PA) warned companies of regurgitating their top ten worst Christmas stories – including pouring turkey fat down the sink. However, PA were the first to use our original approach.

We used a handycam to film our "flushers" (who work in the sewers looking for blockages) singing 'This Christmas Think of Sewermen', our version of 'God rest Ye Merry Gentlemen. Again, we were presenting a tired message in a fresh and original way with no budget. We dressed them in festive hats and posted the film on YouTube, also touting it to news desks with follow-up phone calls. Our release announced the Singing Sewermen were going for Christmas number 1.

ITV1 London re-filmed the Singing Sewermen in action and they also appeared live on BBC Breakfast with Bill Turnbull and Sian Williams. We fielded broadcast interviews from all over the country. Our chief flusher even sang live on BBC Radio Scotland on Christmas Eve.

Using social media, particularly YouTube, we were able to create excitement about cheap handheld footage gathered in the sewers to bring the campaign to life.

### **Hit 3: Fat clearance in Leicester Square**

We invited BBC1 London and BBC Newsround to see just how badly abused the sewers are beneath Leicester Square. We also got our photographer along and touted the images around all the news desks with a news release stating there was up to 1,000 tonnes of fat being removed – nine bus loads worth. We followed this up with proactive media calls, resulting in widespread coverage including the Sun, Five Live and the Mail online.

## **3. Creativity**

Our Singing Sewermen was arguably the best piece of broad-based publicity by a UK water company last year. The fact we used no budget and created a film that looked homemade made it all the more authentic. It captured the imagination of media who covered it and in some cases tried to replicate it. We created a bit of fun but with a serious message and got a staggering amount of coverage. Not bad, for a story PA warned was one of the most overused.

## 4. Evaluation and measurement

### ITV1 Grimefighters

Reached five million viewers per show (we appeared on five programmes throughout the series)

#### Hit 1: Launch

Includes: BBC News Online, ITV London Tonight, BBC1 South, Daily Express

Total coverage: 32

Total target media coverage: 27

Target broadcast coverage: 9

Target press / online coverage: 18 – includes 98 key messages

#### Hit 2: Singing Sewermen

Includes: BBC1 Breakfast (live in the studio); BBC Radio 5 Live; ITV1 London; The Sun; Observer

Total coverage: 33

Total target media coverage: 27

Target broadcast coverage: 12

Target press / online coverage: 15 – includes 61 key messages

#### Hit 3: Leicester Square

Includes: BBC Newsround; BBC News Online (most viewed national video); The Sun, Daily Mail (Editor's 'six of the best'); Independent; Metro; Five Live; BBC1 London

Total coverage: 70

Total target media coverage: 47

Target broadcast coverage: 30

Target press / online coverage: 17 – includes 68 key messages

## 5. Cost-effectiveness

Publicity was achieved with only £250 for photography and £30 for props.

## 6. Final results against objectives

In total there have been 101 pieces of coverage by target media, 51 broadcast and 50 press and online (138 pieces of coverage overall including surrounding regions). Our key messages were used 227 times in press and online, 'Sewer abuse' appeared 27 times and 'Bin it – don't block it' also appeared 27. This was in addition to broadcasted key messages, Thames Water interviews and footage.

We created a campaign section on the website at no cost – there have been 9,000 hits, and over 800 people have taken part in the survey. Hit 1 and 2 resulted in 42 social media mentions, including 19 blogs and reaching 2,901 people on Twitter.

There were over 150,000 Singing Sewermen film hits on BBC News Online, 4,200 hits on YouTube, 1,000 hits on website and 400 hits on Flickr.

Coverage was maximised by doing well-timed 'big-hits'. Activity was carried out with no budget.