

Category: **Outstanding In-House Public Relations Team**

Entrant: **Southern Water**

Entry: **PR on tap**

BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

- Devise innovative campaigns to protect and enhance the company's reputation and improve its performance.
- Provide proactive PR projects to counter issues ranging from droughts to floods.
- Create and operate community support schemes.
- Influence stakeholder and customer opinion.

ANALYSIS OF PERFORMANCE AGAINST BUDGET

We have delivered results despite a budget which has been cut by 40% in the past three years as part of company-wide cost efficiencies. Performance can be measured by the Team winning 36 regional and national PR awards during this period and being short-listed in a further 28 – more than any other PR team in the region.

OVERVIEW OF BUSINESS/TEAM STRATEGY

Each campaign has a separate strategy but most are based on unconventional, attention-grabbing means of attracting attention.

ANNUAL PR BUDGET SHOWING AREAS DIRECTLY UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE TEAM

£1.5 million in 2011, £1.1 million in 2012 and £0.9 million this year. Areas under control include press and PR, public affairs, community relations, graphic design, website, social media, internal communications and community support.

NUMBER OF STAFF EMPLOYED (EXECUTIVE/SUPPORT STAFF) IN THE IN-HOUSE TEAM

Five executives and 17 support staff.

SUMMARY OF RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS

- The 21st consecutive year of a community programme run by the Communications Department which has taught 650,000 children to swim is praised by an Early Day Motion laid down in the House of Commons.
- We formed a partnership with Brighton & Hove Albion F.C. to promote water-efficiency, sending Championship players into 20 local schools who rewarded effort with professional coaching sessions.
- National award-winning campaign praised by the Water Minister to overcome objections to company's controversial programme to provide every home with a water meter, including a public affairs programme involving every MP and newspaper editor.
- Cleaner Seas for Sussex campaign which transformed public opinion from widespread opposition to a wastewater treatment works in Peacehaven to overwhelming support as demonstrated by the local mayor

who said: "Southern Water has become part of the community."

EXAMPLE OF A CAMPAIGN YOU ARE PARTICULARLY PROUD OF:

BRIEF:

The problem of sewer blockages caused by fat, oil and grease (FOG) is not new. For decades customers have poured FOG down the plughole, clogging the arteries of the sewer network, furring them into grimy submission. This creates the risk of sewage overflowing into homes, flooding streets and causing environmental damage.

Traditional solutions have depended on sewer-jetting programmes running in tandem with public relations campaigns aimed at educating customers about the need not to discard fat, oil and grease down the sink, loo or drain.

Three years ago we launched a creative campaign aimed at raising FOG in the public eye. Headline-catching initiatives included giving 180 packets of lard to a renowned potter, commissioning him to sculpt Lardy the Fatman from this unusual material – a UK 'first'. Also, persuading celebrities such as pop star Suggs from Madness to go down the Brighton sewers for free to tell the public that "It's madness to pour fat, oil and grease down the sink".

Two years ago we freshened the campaign with a number of further 'firsts' which included sending a renowned street artist to busy shopping centres in FOG hotspot cities where startled shoppers were stopped in their tracks when confronted with huge 3D visions of FOG-blocked sewers.

During the past year the brief was to again identify an unconventional campaign to build awareness of the problem of fat, oil and grease blocking the sewers.

OBJECTIVE:

The objective was to implement a 'more than business as usual' FOG campaign to help reduce the number of sewer blockages.

STRATEGY AND TACTICS:

We had to identify a new, creative way of solving the FOG problem. Our idea was to launch a scheme which helps reduce sewer blockages while providing rehabilitation and employment for prisoners. Moreover, this new scheme would be the most positive yet of all the company's FOG initiatives because it recycles FOG into products which benefit the planet.

To achieve this we worked in partnership with the charity Work This Way whose goal is to help offenders find jobs. When developing strategy and tactics for this innovative campaign to collect and recycle FOG from customers' homes,

we decided to work with prisoners for a very good reason. Prisons are officially the second biggest producers of used cooking oil in the UK, second only to the Ministry of Defence. Indeed, this is the first prisoner oil-recycling scheme in the UK.

Our strategy was to partner Work This Way so that we could promote the initiative and expand it from purely prisons into domestic collections. This is key to greater success because a recent study by the University of Brighton estimates that each household produces 3kg of used cooking oil – much of which is poured down the plughole. That's no longer the case in our targeted town of East Preston where prisoners make bi-weekly kerbside collections of cooking oil.

Essentially, offenders from Ford Open Prison in West Sussex collect used oil from nearby East Preston homes and from the prison itself and convert the waste into biofuel for vehicles.

Strategy and tactics included launching a PR campaign to encourage households to take part in doorstep collections.

OUTPUTS:

To promote the scheme in East Preston we:

- Staged a media launch with local businesses and stakeholders such as Arun District Council to help publicise the recycling scheme.
- Produced a film promoting FOG messages via a Christmas song sung by Southern Water's sewer engineers, placing it on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fef0ZPBEEc
- Hand-delivered Fat Traps (cartons for collecting fat, oil and grease from frying pans and the like) to every home.
- Wrote, designed and produced brochures encouraging the recycling of cooking fat.
- Dropped leaflets through letterboxes
- After a few months, convened a promo day to refresh the project, with street demonstrations of sewer jetting.
- Routinely distributed press releases and arranged regular media coverage of the campaign, including TV.
- Organised an educational visit to East Preston Primary School.
- Targeted nursing homes via a local email campaign.
- Arranged for Southern Water to agree to provide apprenticeships to those prisoners operating this novel recycling scheme once they have satisfactorily completed their custodial sentences.

OUTCOMES:

- FOG-related sewer blockages in East Preston drop from 119 to 51 – a huge fall of 57%.
- 1,400 people view the FOG film in the first fortnight. It's also widely reported in the media, including ITV.
- Company's reputation benefits from positive media coverage of this 'off the wall' FOG initiative which has also drawn praise from stakeholders such as Brighton MP Caroline Lucas who said: "Offering an oil collection service

to residents is not only a great way to cut down on waste but also a good way to protect the environment."

- In the first year of the scheme more than 10,000 litres of cooking oil which might otherwise have been poured down the plughole has been collected and converted into 8,880 litres of biofuel – enough to fill the fuel tanks of 270 Ford Fiestas.
- The recycled oil has already provided enough biofuel for a family car to drive 16 times around the world's circumference.
- Cost benefits for Southern Water because bi-products of recycled cooking oils include glycerine which can be used instead of methanol in the treatment of wastewater. To date 1,835 litres of glycerine have been produced.
- Sustained employment for prisoners because the cooking oil is converted into biofuel which is sold commercially to help fund the scheme.
- Scheme extended in 2013/14 to prisons in Hampshire, Surrey and Kent.

Following the success of the project, a training scheme has been developed which allows prisoners to gain professional qualifications, helping them to secure employment when released. Over 60 offenders have completed the course.

BUDGET

£20,000 to finance the scheme which is now self-funding.

200 WORDS ON WHAT MAKES YOU SPECIAL

There is a growing need in PR to 'think outside the box' to grasp the public imagination and enlist the support of customers. That's what makes us special – our continuing ability to create innovative, headline-grabbing campaigns, enhancing the company's reputation while improving its performance. This is demonstrated not just by the FOG campaign which has been recognised by experts at the Innovation Unit and the Cabinet Office but by a number of other campaigns.

These range from an award-winning project we commenced last year to work in partnership with Nickleodeon to televise a water efficiency cartoon (this unusual partnership arrangement restricted costs to just £10,000 for a year's programming for viewers) to our Learn to Swim scheme which has taught over 200,000 Sussex children and is developed each year by new initiatives to raise its profile such as special awards ceremonies for disabled and disadvantaged children.

This year we're working on a stunt for a group of children to pull an aeroplane with a rope made from wet wipes to persuade the public not to dispose of them by flushing them down the loo.

To deliver these campaigns, we offer CIPR training courses to all staff, several of whom have gone on to gain the CIPR Advanced Certificate in Public Relations and CIPR Diplomas. This also helps to equip us with the skills, unlike many PR teams, to respond to media enquiries 24 hours a day, seven days a week, even on Christmas Day.