

CIPR PRide Awards 2014

Category: **04. Community Relations Campaign**

Entrant: **Southern Water**

Entry: **Drama in the drain**



Brief and objectives

The problem of sewer blockages caused by fat, oil and grease (FOG) and other items is an old and continuing community issue - our challenge is to keep creating new ways of highlighting it.

For decades, customers have poured fat down their plugholes and flushed unsuitable objects down their loos, clogging the arteries of our sewer network and furring them into grimy submission. This behaviour can have devastating results because it creates the risk of sewage overflowing into homes, flooding streets and damaging the environment.

We came up with our Pain in the Drain initiative to raise public awareness of the issue and educate customers about the need to think before they pour or flush. It has since spawned a string of successful, headline-grabbing campaigns. For instance, last year we created pavement art in the shopping centres of towns particularly blighted by blockages. Our amazing 3D image of the inside of a fat-clogged sewer fooled many shoppers into thinking the ground had opened up to reveal the horrors below.

Our aim is to keep freshening the campaign with new, eye-catching ideas that make a lasting impression. One of the latest is our specially commissioned show Down The Toilet!, three short plays with plenty of audience participation to provide a unique way to put the message to adults and, importantly, youngsters, who are our customers of the future.

Over the past year, the brief was to identify an unconventional campaign that would increase awareness of the issue and keep it firmly in the public eye.

Strategy and tactics (including innovation and creativity)

We had to think differently to identify new, creative ways of solving the Pain in the Drain problem. Nowadays, one of the biggest cause of blockages is wet wipes and we decided they would be the focus of our initiative.

Even wipes described as flushable cause blockages and the biodegradable ones often don't spend long enough in the sewer to start to decompose. But how would we convince the public of the strength of wet wipes?

Our strategy was to ask a group of air cadets to make a rope out of ordinary household wipes and use it to pull a half-ton aircraft along a private airfield in West Sussex. The rope was made without using knots to replicate the way wipes get tangled up in pipes and the public sewer. Even the cadets were surprised by the results of our innovative plan, having initially doubted the strength of the wipes.

Our strategy and tactics were to produce a PR campaign with wide appeal that became a talking point - and which put over our message in an unusual and memorable way.

Implementation (including where, when and for how long)

The beauty of the plane pull campaign was that it was relevant to our entire region, from Hampshire and the Isle of Wight in the west to Kent in the east. It potentially reached all our 4.5 million customers. Though it was self-contained - we filmed it and sent out coverage last September - it remains in the public eye on YouTube where it is still attracting hits. The essence of the initiative - demonstrating the strength of domestic wet wipes - also has the potential to be developed in a variety of other ways.

Demonstrate tangible benefits to the communities where the campaign was targeted, including any sustainability

Pain in the Drain blockages FELL by almost half in the three months after the plane pull - the figures are detailed in [Outcomes](#) below.

These blockages threaten the environment as well as homes and businesses. Reducing them means that potentially disastrous sewage flooding and the resulting misery for customers is averted.

Southern Water spends millions of pounds each year on clearing such blockages - this money could be passed to customers in savings.

Build-ups of fat, oil and grease can also put wastewater pumping stations out of action so reducing them is beneficial both to us and the communities we serve.

Statistics show that the number of blockages in our region in January to March this year - after the plane pull - were lower than the same period last year before the initiative (see [Outcomes](#)). This is encouraging evidence that the effect of the campaign is sustainable.

Research, planning, measurement and evaluation (showing outcomes and outputs)

We continually measure sewer blockages and consequently are able to focus and plan campaigns based on our findings. If necessary, we can target areas that are particular hotspots. This also means we can evaluate the success of our campaigns.

Outputs:

- We issued press releases about the plane pull across our whole region, reaching more than 60 news outlets with our message
- The releases carried a link to a film of the plane pull on YouTube. This initially received more than 1,000 hits - and continues to attract hits months later
- The film featured on ITV Meridian News, potentially reaching eight million viewers
- We shared the clip on Facebook and Twitter and the cadets did the same.

Outcomes:

Pain in the Drain blockages fell by almost half in the three months after the plane pull:

- From January to December 2013, there were **9,744** blockages caused by wet wipes and FOG in the Southern Water region.
- From October to December 2013 (after the plane pull) there were 1,771, compared with **3,266** in the same period in 2012.

This shows that for the three-month period after the plane pull film was shown, there were **1,495** fewer blockages in our region, a reduction of almost 50 per cent.

From January to March this year, some months after the pull, we had **2,948** blockages in our region. This compares with **3,362** in the same period last year, which was before the plane pull. This drop of **414**, some 12 per cent, indicates the progress is being sustained.

Following the success of the initiative, we plan to extend it. We are in talks to use wet wipes to pull the Big Lemon Bus in Brighton, a sustainable service which runs on recycled cooking oil collected from local restaurants. We also hope to do the same with a train at The Bluebell Railway in Sussex, which has the largest collection of Southern steam locomotives.

Budget and cost effectiveness

The plane pull cost just £750, which was spent on professional filming and editing, plus bars of chocolate for our willing air cadets. It costs £200 to send two operatives with a heavy jetter to clear a sewer blockage. This represents a saving of £298,250 over a three-month period.
