

# CIPR PRide Awards 2014

Category: **28. Outstanding In-House Public Relations Team**

Entrant: **Southern Water**

Entry: **High-flying PR**

## Business objectives

- Devise innovative campaigns to protect and enhance company reputation and improve performance
- Come up with proactive PR projects to counter issues from flood to drought
- Create and operate community support schemes
- Influence stakeholder and customer opinion.

## Analysis of team performance

Performance can be measured by the team winning 30 regional and national PR awards during this period and being shortlisted in a further 14.

## Overview of business/team strategy

Each campaign has a separate strategy but most use unconventional, attention-grabbing methods to gain coverage and stakeholder endorsement.

## Areas directly under the control of the team

We control 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 15 support staff.

## Summary of recent achievements

- Our Learn to Swim scheme, run by the Communications Department. In 22 years it has helped some 650,000 children to swim and is widely praised, most recently by Olympic star Rebecca Adlington
- Partnerships with professional sporting clubs, including Southampton Football Club, to promote water efficiency. We send Premiership players into schools to reward effort with professional coaching
- Our Aqua Innovation schools' competition continues to grow and attract praise. Arundel and South Downs MP Nick Herbert said the scheme, which challenges pupils to devise water-saving ideas, was a chance to make a real difference
- Cleaner Seas For Sussex. We transformed public opinion from widespread opposition to a new sewage treatment works in Peacehaven, near Brighton, to overwhelming support. The mayor said: "Southern Water has become part of the community."

## Example of a campaign you are particularly proud of:

### Brief:

Sewer blockages caused by fat, oil and grease (FOG) and

other non-flushable items are an old problem. Customers have continued to pour FOG down the plughole, causing the risk of sewage overflowing into homes, flooding streets and damaging the environment. They also flush items such as nappies and wet wipes – and wipes are now one of the biggest causes of blockages.

Our continuing challenge is to devise creative, eye-catching campaigns which keep this problem in the public eye – and make people think before they act.

Our Pain In The Drain campaign began three years ago and we have since created a string of headline-catching initiatives:

We hosted celebrities including TV presenter Fred Dinenage and singer Suggs from Madness on tours of Brighton's Victorian sewers to highlight the perils of putting unsuitable items down the sink and loo.

We created street art in shopping centres with eye-popping visions of fat-clogged sewers. The chalk masterpieces gave an illusion of the ground opening to reveal the horrors beneath.

We filmed our "singing sewer men" performing a bespoke festive carol and a team of staff dancing the Harlem Shake in the sewers. Both were shared on YouTube and Facebook.

In the past year we raised the bar again with help from a group of air cadets. They demonstrated the resilience of wet wipes by pulling a plane with them.

### Objective:

To continue a campaign that is beyond "business as usual", ensuring it is always fresh and becomes a talking point. The aim is to reduce blockages caused by unsuitable items being flushed or poured into the network.

### Strategy and tactics:

Our plane pull was an original way to put across the Pain In The Drain message. It was fun but the result was hard hitting.

We worked with a team of local air cadets, which had the added bonus of widening our appeal to a younger audience. They made a rope from ordinary household wipes and used it to pull a half-ton aircraft along a Sussex airfield. The rope was made without knots to replicate the way wipes get tangled in pipes and the sewer.

Even the cadets were surprised by the results of our innovative plan – they initially doubted the strength of the wipes.

Our strategy and tactics were to produce a persuasive PR campaign with wide appeal – and spread our message in an unusual, memorable way.

### 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 on YouTube. This initially received more than 1,000 hits - and continues to attract hits months later
- The event featured on ITV Meridian News, potentially reaching eight million viewers
- We shared the clip on Facebook and Twitter and the cadets did the same.

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### Outcomes:

Pain in the Drain blockages fell by almost half in the three months after the plane pull, a positive result for the environment and our reputation.

- From January to December 2013, there were 9,744 blockages caused by wet wipes and FOG in our 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.

Following the initiative's success, we are extending it, for example, we are in talks to use wipes to pull the Big Lemon Bus in Brighton, a sustainable service which runs on recycled cooking oil from restaurants.

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### BUDGET

The plane pull cost just £750 - for professional filming and editing - plus chocolate bars for our willing 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 three months.

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### A brief overview on what makes you special as a public relations team

We pride ourselves on creating innovative, headline-grabbing campaigns which enhance the company's reputation. We do so in the face of extreme challenges, for example drought followed swiftly by unprecedented flooding. Undaunted, we remain full of fresh, sparkling ideas for delivering messages in an eye-catching manner.

We must capture public imagination so we gain - and maintain - their support. Good examples of how we do this are our successful Pain In The Drain campaign and our singing sewer men.

Our Learn to Swim scheme is in its 22nd year and its profile keeps growing because we continually create fresh ways to develop it.

Our longstanding campaigns help make us special. Many organisations abandon sponsorships after three years but we expand campaigns that work. As well as Learn to Swim, our well-established achievements include:

- The Drips - our professionally performed water-efficiency show has run since 1998
- Sporting Chance - we have taught children about keeping fit and water for health through this programme since 2009
- South and South East in Bloom - we have been actively involved since 2000, encouraging water conservation in 500 communities.

To deliver these campaigns, we offer CIPR training courses to staff. Several have gone on to the CIPR Advanced Certificate in PR and CIPR Diplomas. Unlike many PR teams, we respond to media enquiries round the clock, even on Christmas Day, as we did in 2013 when severe storms disrupted the company's services.

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