

Paul Davison, Managing Director, Proteus, on positive communications in the waste and recycling industries



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Time to get positive

Ask anyone who knows about behaviour change, from the most expensive US business Guru to Supper Nanny, and they will tell you that the best way to get a sustained behaviour change is through positive re-enforcement! So why is so much media attention given over to the negative elements of waste and recycling?

Of course it's a rhetorical question: Bad News is Good News for the media, right? Wrong. The media are not only interested in Bad News (perhaps with the exception of the Daily Mail) and there are lots of opportunities to get positive messages out there. It's about time we took a breather from beating ourselves over the head about the need to do more.

Let's just remind ourselves how far we have come. In a relatively short period of time recycling rates within this country have increased substantially and, as evidence from the LGA showed recently, average contamination rates are surprisingly low. There has also been a substantial increase in investment both in collection and reprocessing infrastructure, with a lot more to come. In short, we have done fantastically well - and by 'we' I mean everyone involved, including our sometimes confused domestic recyclers. Telling people that they have contributed to one of the biggest environmental revolutions ever would come as a bit of shock to most, and there lies the problem - it shouldn't be a shock, they should know.

The experts will tell you that it takes time to achieve a sustained behaviour change, and that's one of the remarkable things about this most secret of revolutions - it's been relatively fast. Most people have already accepted the change because they instinctively see recycling as a 'good thing'. At this time of increasing awareness of environmental issues, particularly climate change, residents should know that their efforts are making a significant positive contribution to reducing their impacts on the environment.

They should know how much material has been recycled and the amount of energy saved. They should know where the materials go - and if that means that they go to China as the best environmental option then let's say so and explain why. If people in the UK aren't buying enough goods with recycled content to create viable local markets, then our domestic recyclers need to know this, because surely this is the next major behaviour change that needs to happen.

So, before starting on the more difficult communications issues that now face the industry - such as nationwide alternating weekly collections, pay to throw (if it ever happens) and most controversially of all, residual waste management solutions - we should remind people how far they have come in so short a period of time. Then we can position further necessary changes as the logical next step for a nation of excellent recyclers.

Of course we can do better, but when you look back at the last five years – didn't we do well!

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