

# One Step At A Time

Communications in our industry are vital, especially between consumers, and therefore we deserve a pat on the back, according to **Paul Davison**. You weren't expecting that, were you?

**W**ell, the "easy bit" has been done. We have dramatically increased recycling and dragged a rather apathetic public kicking and screaming all the way to the kerbside to participate, to some degree, in "their" recycling scheme. In a relatively short period of time the industry has increased recycling rates dramatically, with public participation being far wider spread – geographically and socially – than ever before. Now we are starting to see residual waste technologies becoming operational, but has anyone said "thank you" to the authorities and industry for providing the solutions, or even said well done to the public for participating? Of course not. We are too busy moving onto the next issue – and anyway, the media are only interested in bad news, and boy is waste management bad news!

So here is the problem as I see it – far too few people realise they have participated in one of the biggest social and environmental changes this country has seen for decades. The UK is now a recycling nation – of course we need to get better, but let's just take stock of the sheer scale of the achievement before we move on.

Hitting our targets for landfill diversion within the time scale allowed was always going to be a difficult journey, so despite what the tabloids may say – and with typical UK understatement – we've started the journey quite well. Trouble is, most people in the UK didn't know they were on a journey in the first place,

and those that did, didn't know why!

We missed the opportunity of explaining why we needed to change our waste management processes and the environmental benefits that would follow. Recycling was seen as an inherently good thing, so many people got "stuck in" regardless. However, when things started to get difficult, either because they put the wrong things in the recycling boxes or because their bin collection moved to every other week, the general public started to complain. Public complaint was the bad news the media needed for its next round of easy copy.

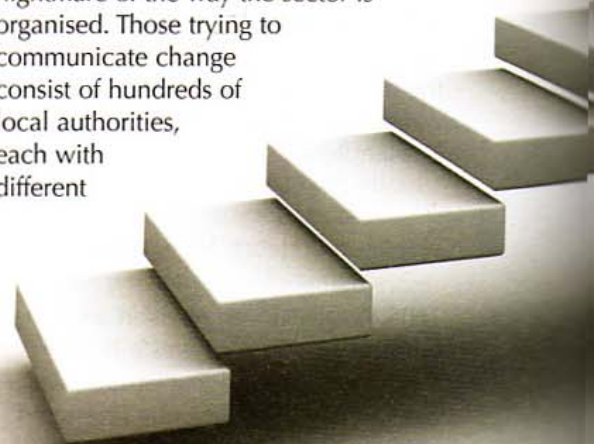
Of course this is only the start. We are now moving onto the hard stuff – increasing capture rates, enhancing the quality of recyclate and widespread availability of solutions for residual waste. The media will love this even more.

The problem, as I see it, is so fundamental that there is no easy solution. The UK waste management sector is far too fragmented and uncoordinated, and it has consistently failed to enhance its reputation – which was always behind the reality of what it has achieved any way. It's this outdated view of waste management and a lack of sustained proactive communications that has made the waste sector an easy target for negative publicity. Now this isn't going to be another piece about where we went wrong, in fact far from it. The sector has, in my opinion, delivered fantastic results, and it is often a problem with an industry going through sustained change that far too

often it doesn't take the time to review how far it has come, and makes too little of the significant achievements to date. So, before we go any further and start to communicate about the difficult bits, we should publicly pat every participant on the back. The ideal timing for this would probably be immediately before any new *Recycling Week* initiative. So, once we all feel a bit better, we can then move on to explain why we have only just begun.

The problem with UK waste management is that potential communications messages, like the solutions being provided, are hugely diverse. In many major urban areas recycling schemes change from street to street. Time scales and technologies chosen for solutions to waste issues vary as well. The net result is that any national messaging on waste issues has been reduced to very simplistic themes, generally addressing awareness.

So, in communications terms, the problem we face rests with the nightmare of the way the sector is organised. Those trying to communicate change consist of hundreds of local authorities, each with different



solutions, supported by different government departments and their agents, all trying to communicate to around 50m Britons – most of whom are as confused by the structure of local government as they are by the difference between HDPE and PET.

The audiences also have various degrees of awareness, interest, education, financial stability and indeed competence with the English language. Finally, the messages are not all going unopposed. There are many occasions where environmental NGOs confuse messages still further with alternative claims about the best way forward, and we haven't even started on the information available on the Internet, which states that energy from waste – one of the best available technologies available for the effective disposal of residual waste – will kill you in your beds while you sleep!

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## Enhancing Performance

MANY RESIDENTS that could be considered to be the “low hanging fruit” of potential recyclers are well on board, and we are down to the difficult audiences: residents in tower blocks, transient communities such as students and seasonal workers, millions of new emigrants who did not recycle in other parts of Europe and who have English as a second language, cultural barriers and let us not forget those who will not recycle whatever you tell them (some research suggests this could be as high as five percent of the population, almost 3m residents in total).

To effectively engage with these groups is going to take longer and cost more, and we are not just talking about translation costs. Of course it is helpful to be able to communicate with different groups in their own



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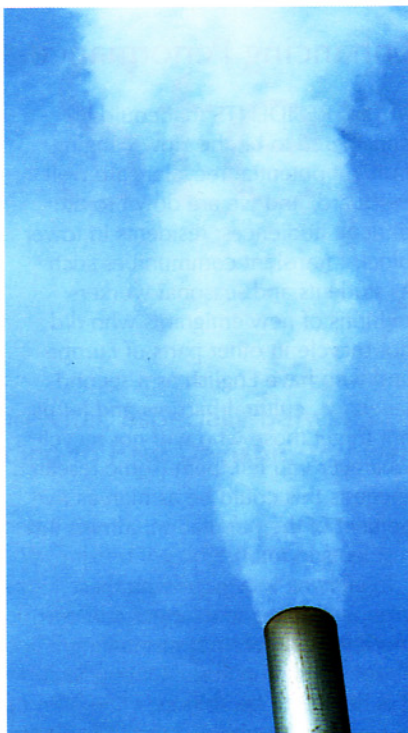


language, respecting their cultural attitudes. But, to be effective, this may require approaching many communities not through their front door but via community groups, which may be age and gender specific.

This subtlety will be important for success, and a good place to start could be the white, middle-class family currently used on the TV ads to build awareness of the possibilities for recycling. I think research will show that most of that audience is already recycling, and they are aware of the issues and what to do about them. For this audience we need to move on to enhance the quality of the way they recycle, increasing the cleanliness and variety of materials put in the boxes. For the harder to reach groups we need to encourage participation in the first place, with images and messages they can identify with and which they find engaging – this requires an integrated communications approach with some form of central co-ordination.

One final point for consideration: for the first time in the 20 years I have worked in the environmental sector, we are starting to see far greater interest in environmental issues than ever before – and it's far more informed than the dolphin-saving antics of the 1980s. This awareness is surely the most significant opportunity for engaging all audiences about recycling. Recycling and waste minimisation are two of the easiest actions the public can take to significantly help with climate change.

Banning single-use carrier bags has far greater value in engaging the public than the environmental benefits. In other words, UK residents will start to appreciate that they are both part of the problem and the solution to climate change and their actions can make a difference – even if, in the case of bags, this is more litter prevention than saving the planet. So let's ban the bag (for a start) and then educate all audiences about the direct link between their actions and climate change, so we encourage the public to take direct environmental action. In this way recycling would be seen as normal social behaviour, not a chore or an action limited to "do-gooders".



**Smoke and chimneys – one of the biggest waste management myths in existence**

## Killing The WM Myths

**BEFORE** A significant number of residual waste facilities can be built in the UK, we need to have the independent and verified evidence to debunk many of the myths about waste management that are in circulation among the Internet-based network of protest groups.

Back in the 1980s, when there was a flurry of planning applications for hazardous waste incinerators, some environmental NGOs drew attention to the emissions of dioxins and furans. Because no scientific evidence was available to put such emissions into context, dioxins became known as the "most dangerous chemical known to man". From a scientific point of view this is nonsense, but the myth has never been addressed directly.

Although the waste sector has moved onto other issues over the last few years, the precautionary principle and the lack of evidence to deal with emission myths has remained. So those companies and authorities pushing hard to get energy from waste plants built are facing the same arguments as in the

1980s, again without the evidence to back them up, and currently each new planning application results in the communications wheel being re-invented time after time, because of commercial sensitivities between competing bidders.

There are other myths we need to address too – the concept of 100 percent recycling of municipal waste and zero waste; the claim that energy from waste plants need "feeding" and therefore reduce recycling, for example.

To achieve the amount of residual waste treatment facilities required within the timescale will need these issues to be addressed. Without it, not only will authorities waste money on Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme fines, but I fear that questions may also be asked about the way in which planning decisions are being made. This may lead to an attack on the relatively new and much improved approach of Cabinet decision-making – an approach that most of the general public are completely unaware of anyway.

The need for an independent, credible body to provide the hard evidence on these issues is a vital component of the way we must deal with public communications to get facts – not opinions – back on the agenda. As far as government is concerned, such an approach would also be helpful for other policy areas such as emissions from aviation, the need for alternative energy technologies and the forthcoming debate on nuclear power.

In conclusion, we still have a lot to do, and a refocus on co-ordinated communications with far greater emphasis on targeting and consistent messages is essential. Evidence to support change is of course helpful – even though some people most opposed to development won't listen anyway.

Finally, let's not lose the opportunity to remind everyone of the fact that UK waste management has helped deliver one of the most important environmental revolutions this country has seen for decades – and it did it with the public's help! **CJWM**

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