

Hear ye! Hear ye! How to change for the better

Although the UK's waste industry is growing, it has been accused of having a terrible reputation with communications. *Paul Davison*, managing director of Proteus Public Relations, looks at how the UK waste management industry has communicated over the last 20 years and an example of recycling initiatives in Denmark.

THE UK waste management industry is among the finest in the world, but it has a terrible reputation that doesn't do it justice. One reason for this apparent paradox is the way the UK waste management industry has communicated over the last 20 years.

Most communications have been very local in scope and generally have occurred only when individual companies wanted something - like a planning permission. There are exceptions, like the Waste & Resources Action Programme's (WRAP) national Recycle Now campaign - although this has mostly focused on raising general recycling awareness and not explaining why behavioural change is needed.

The current poor perception of the sector cannot be blamed on the biased attitudes of the media. It results from a lack of collective will to invest money in positive, pro-active communications.

'all suffer from poor reputation'

Everyone throughout the waste chain - from collectors, to recyclers, reproprocessors and disposers - all suffer from the industry's poor reputation.

In my view the current position is the result of two fundamental factors: the manner in which the UK waste sector has developed over the last three decades and our historic dependency on landfill.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s many local authorities must have thought that privatisation would reduce their waste headaches. However, many of the people who took over the new waste companies had come from local authorities and had no intention of dramatically changing communications practices. To be fair, they had new businesses to run in one of the most regulated sectors in the UK - so they had other priorities.

This period also saw dramatic changes in local government, and they too had many other higher priorities than waste management. One impact that still results in confusion to this day was the shift of responsibility for collection to districts and for disposal to county.

Consequently both local authorities and waste management contractors have conducted limited communications during a time of great change in the sector - change that delivers substantial benefits to the general public and the environment, and of which the public is largely unaware.

The net result is far more damaging than 'just' a poor reputation; it is the lack of 'ownership' of

waste issues by the UK general public. Thirty years of simply putting a bag out on the street once a week and having someone take the 'problem' away has become an entrenched behaviour.

But just imagine a situation where the general public has a mature relationship with the waste sector, based on trust and understanding. Communities actively take an interest in what happens to their waste, and actually get involved in the process to such a degree that the majority see waste management as their problem.

This isn't fantasy - this is reality in Denmark. Not only do they have one of the highest recycling rates in Europe, but local communities actively encourage extensive recycling schemes as they see their waste as a resource.

They accept energy from waste (EW) plants in their communities because, in Denmark, this generally means that a community district heating system will also be included. They know that this will dramatically reduce carbon emissions for domestic heating and save residents substantial energy costs.

Of course, the Danish model cannot simply be picked up and dropped on the UK, not least because of the different local government system and the widespread acceptance of a communal approach to local services. However, I believe that the Danish experience does illustrate the second fundamental root of current UK problems - our over-dependence on landfill. The UK has benefited from relatively widely available landfill which provided cheap disposal. This easy route means we haven't worked hard enough at waste management - landfill is the ultimate 'out of sight, out of mind' solution.

While we have to accept where we are now, it is how we move forward that's important. So far the outlook isn't good. The UK waste management sector has always been fragmented, with widely distributed responsibility in which no-one saw any value in collective communications. This isn't getting better: the sector is becoming more fragmented and complex as more players enter the waste management chain.

There is a very real danger that if we don't learn from our history and begin to communicate both collectively and effectively, we will make the same mistake again - and it's not just our reputation that will suffer: the consumer will increasingly resent and potentially resist necessary change.

In PR terms, the situation is going from bad to worse. It seems to me that both local



We need to generate a sustained change in consumer behaviour regarding an important service, and we need the public to understand that if they don't change their behaviour they, ultimately, will be the ones who suffer through increased costs.

In communications terms the strategy is simple:

- Explain why the change is needed
- Explain what they need to do
- Implement the change in a positive and supportive way
- Reward good behaviour
- Spread understanding of how well things are going - to reinforce the desired behaviour.

Consumer attitudes are changing fast and there is far greater awareness of environmental issues, particularly climate change. Participation in recycling and waste minimisation is one of the most tangible environmentally beneficial activities the general public can achieve. Consumers want to participate.

Implementing change in a positive way, particularly behavioural change, is the best way to engage the general public. It's not simply about when they should do things, but explaining the impacts of the things they do. Publicly rewarding good behaviour is the obvious extension of this, so let's have more 'green super heroes' jumping out and giving people £10 for correctly sorting their recycling.

'this is a misnomer'

Keeping people up-to-date on how well things are going is also vital, or the behaviour change could be short lived as consumers slip back into old habits.

Finally, the best way to achieve this positive communications environment is for the whole sector to respond as one - not as individual companies.

Waste collectors, recyclers, reproprocessors, disposers, local authorities and advisory organisations like WRAP should give out consistent messages, so that recycling behaviour is put into the broader context of fully dealing with our wastes.

In my experience the general public is a lot more sophisticated than most people think. Treating them like adults helps.

They need to know all the facts about this great change in waste management.

You never know, we may suddenly find that once they understand, they may actually want to help.

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