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Metro Toronto Works Department

'Every little bit counts'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years there has been a pronounced increase in the public's awareness of environmental issues. Yet the perceived magnitude of some of the problems was so overwhelming that many people were not modifying their behaviour, thinking that one person could hardly make a difference. In response to this, Metropolitan Toronto's Works Department needed a campaign to encourage citizens to participate in municipal environmental programmes, by reminding them that their co-operation was necessary, easy and meaningful.

The campaign's main objective was to increase household participation in Metro Toronto's Waste Management programmes. Metro advanced the three Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle) in a variety of programmes including Blue Box recycling, backyard composting, water efficiency, and household hazardous waste disposal. In order to encourage participation, the public had to be educated on programme specifics.

The first order of business was to establish a core positioning that spoke to the importance of personal involvement - 'every little bit counts'. Newspaper was selected as the primary medium, and a distinctive format was developed to ensure the various ads were instantly recognizable. During critical time periods, this print campaign was augmented with both radio and television to help extend the advertising reach. In all cases, the message was positive and avoided the use of harsh scare tactics.

The response to the campaign has been consistently remarkable. Over 90% of Metro Toronto homes are now participating in the Blue Box program. After running one ad to kick off an Environment Days event, composter sales increased threefold, used tyre collection increased sixfold, and sales of water conservation kits increased tenfold.

Also, 3,000 pieces of unused sporting equipment were donated for recycling and over 1,000 coupons were redeemed, along with \$10 each, for the purchase of a water conservation kit. And, in a direct challenge to the city of San Diego, Metro Toronto received 4,816 calls to its waste reduction hotline versus the 59 of its US counterpart.

The advertising helped Metro Toronto earn its reputation as having one of the most successful waste management programmes of any major urban centre in North America.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Global warming. The hole in the ozone layer. The plight of the rainforest. The looming crisis of urban landfill. As the decade began, a mounting list of environmental problems seemed to become overwhelming and beyond one person's ability to do something about them.

This helplessness threatened to become a recipe for inaction. Unfortunately, many people had a variety of reasons for not altering their lifestyle. Some felt that the problem rested with (and therefore the solution had to come from) big industrial players. Many felt overwhelmed by the scope of the issues, and resigned themselves to the notion that they could do very little to help.

In Metro Toronto, there was both ignorance and uncertainty as to the range of services that the Metro Works Department offered. While the Blue Box programme had high visibility (a walk through the neighbourhood on collection days would show many blue containers by the curbside), other recent initiatives of the Metro Works Department were less well known.

Moreover, new waste management technology allowed many more products to be recycled. As the level of sophistication of the Blue Box programme increased, continuous education was needed to raise understanding and awareness of what was and what was not recyclable.

Metro residents had to learn that they could become part of the solution. This meant raising the awareness of less familiar programmes. In addition, the waste management programme had to be perceived as simple and convenient rather than time consuming and complex. Finally, there would be no scare tactics. The campaign would set a positive tone.

STRATEGY AND EXECUTION

The campaign's main objective was to increase household participation in Metro Toronto's waste management programmes including Blue Box recycling, backyard composting, water efficiency, and household hazardous waste disposal. Seasonal projects (such as summer lawn watering reduction and Christmas tree recycling) and special events (such as Environment Days and Waste Reduction Week) also had to be highlighted. Because of the scope of the initiatives, only one topic was featured at a time to ensure that the information was focused and accessible.

The overall strategic thrust rested on the premise that although the magnitude of environmental waste was huge, every single one of us, every single day, could make small contributions that, when added together, become significant. In essence, 'every little bit counts'.

Newspaper was the primary media choice because it let readers clip pertinent information for subsequent reference, provided comprehensive coverage, and lent a sense of immediacy. Because of the diversity of the initiatives, a standard advertising format was developed so that Metro Toronto residents could easily identify Metro Works as the source of information on environmental issues. To the same end, in every print ad dedicated hotlines were listed for each specific programme.

Fresh and humorous headlines were used to project a positive attitude. 'Drop in after dinner', for instance, was used to promote the addition of aluminum TV dinner trays to the list of Blue Box recyclables. 'Believe it or not, we want nothing from you at all', was used to promote Waste Reduction Week. Some ads played off current events. For instance, a composting ad that ran during the 1993 hockey play-offs was headlined: 'Who said the Leafs can't make a comeback?' After a successful play-off run by the Toronto Hockey Club, a fall composting ad greeted the 1993-1994 hockey season with: 'Help the Leafs do it again.' Body copy on all ads was informative and explanatory, providing readers with a number to call for more information. To reinforce the importance of individual participation, every print ad ended with the slogan: 'Every little bit counts.'

Radio and television broadcast media was used tactically to supplement the message and extend the reach. A tongue-in-cheek television spot featuring the all-time comeback king, Elvis, encouraged Blue Box recycling and clarified what could and could not be recycled. The spot ran on virtually every Toronto area TV station, including French language stations. It was light-hearted, good natured and positive in tone.

THE 1992 TO 1994 RESULTS

The consistent and positive shift in both behaviour and attitude compared to previous years was phenomenal. The advertising reminded the public about the importance of the three Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle) and encouraged participation on all fronts.

In Metro, 90% of residents are now participating in the Blue Box recycling programme (the number would be higher but many apartment dwellers do not have access to Blue Boxes). During the campaign, residents were continually reminded to keep participating, and were updated on the recyclability of goods through ads such as

the 'Elvis' spot.

While it is virtually impossible to make direct comparisons with other jurisdictions because of the significant differences in programmes, Toronto is widely regarded as having one of the most successful waste management programmes among major urban centres.

Some other results of the campaign that deserve mention include the following:

- In the fall of 1992, an ad announced that Metro residents were competing against the citizens of San Diego to see which city could reduce the most waste in a day. As a measurement, residents were to phone a special hotline number and explain what they did to reduce their garbage. In the eight-hour span that the lines were open, Toronto residents placed 4,816 calls, to San Diego's 59 calls.
- In the summer of 1993, a newspaper ad ran promoting water efficiency. Residents were offered Metro Retrofit Kits (several products to help reduce water wastage) for \$10 with the submission of the newspaper coupon. Over 1,000 coupons were turned in ([Figure 1](#)).
- In the late summer of 1993, an Environment Days newspaper ad ran which featured a composting promotion, but also carried a sidebar listing other programmes, along with dates and locations for local Environment Days. During the post-ad Environment Days event, which ran from August through early October, there was a significant increase in activity compared to similar events that were not advertised. As a result, composter sales increased 295% ([Figure 2](#)). There were fewer unsafe products going into landfills because of a 225% increase in the weight of goods deposited at special toxic depots ([Figure 3](#)), and there was a 620% increase in the number of tires collected for safe disposal ([Figure 4](#)). Furthermore, there was a 1004% increase in the number of water reduction kits sold ([Figure 1](#)).
- In October 1993, 'Give a kid a sporting chance' ran in conjunction with Waste Reduction Week. Residents were encouraged to donate all their unused sporting equipment for reuse by inner city children. This public outreach initiative resulted in the collection of over 3,000 pieces of equipment that were subsequently redistributed.

CONCLUSION

Metro residents clearly responded to the positive nature of the campaign and helped pitch in to ease the city's solid waste burden. Respondents to the ads came from all socio-economic backgrounds and all ages. And, while the garbage problem has not disappeared, the future looks more promising. Indeed, 'every little bit counts'.

CLIENT

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