Selling recycling to a sceptical public

A guide to planning your communications campaigns

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Do **positive** or **negative** messages have a greater impact on attitudes towards recycling?

That’s the question to which the industry needs an answer; so CBI PR decided to find out. We commissioned an independent company, Mindlab International, to undertake a detailed piece of research that explored public attitudes to recycling, and what sort of messages would encourage or deter them to take part in their local schemes.

Our main finding was a positive one – namely that people with a negative view of recycling are more likely to change their attitude after seeing positive messages about the benefits. Other key findings included:

- People **subconsciously think recycling is more important** after viewing positive messages
- **44% probably wouldn’t make the effort to take their recycling elsewhere** if they didn’t have facilities at work
- **Just over half of** the respondents would **encourage work colleagues to recycle**
- Recycling facilities at work are high but could be increased – **78% of respondents said they had recycling bins**
- **52% are confused about** what they can and can’t recycle
- **69% of respondents preferred leaflets** as the main method of receiving information about recycling services

These results provide invaluable information to companies and organisations looking to formulate communications campaigns that will have a real impact on recycling rates – and in the following pages we offer some advice on the key issues to consider.
We wanted to measure subconscious associations as part of our research, as this bypasses people’s tendency to answer in a socially desirable way. By taking this approach it allowed us to more accurately measure whether communications had an impact on attitudes towards recycling.

Our research showed that positive messages had a far greater impact than negative messages on people who reported that recycling was less important to them – those crucial hard to reach groups - the sceptics in the title of this guide.

This is an interesting insight, in light of on-going discussions about the ‘carrot’ or ‘stick’ approach. Could more aggressive tactics, such as ‘pay as you throw’ or a tax on litter be counter-productive?

**BEST PRACTICE**

*We recommend that a positive approach is the best option, so embedding encouraging, engaging and inclusive imagery and content in recycling campaigns is a smart strategy for future success.*
Employers need to do more to help staff recycle at work

78% of the people polled in our research said they had access to recycling facilities at work, which is a respectable number, but there is obviously room for improvement.

However, when asked if they would make the effort to take their recycling home, or elsewhere, if facilities did not exist at work, 10% said they definitely would not, and 44% said they probably would not.

Recycling does not begin and end at home, and employers have a vital role to play in increasing recycling rates. The majority of organisations are committed to thinking and acting in a ‘greener’ way.

BEST PRACTICE

Providing facilities that enable employees to recycle their ‘waste’ - from paper, to bottles, to drinks cans - is a simple way for organisations to embed recycling into their company culture.
Recruit work recycling champions

When asked if they were happy to ‘spread the word’ about the benefits of recycling, our respondents revealed that they are more likely to encourage friends and family than their work colleagues.

This is another great opportunity for companies to help change hearts and minds, as our result reveals a ‘gap in the market’ for work recycling champions.

Employees who are committed to promoting recycling in your organisation can also be a useful conduit for staff feedback – because internal communications only work if they are a two-way street.

**BEST PRACTICE**

We recommend you identify and recruit ‘cheerleaders’ to strengthen internal communications campaigns, as designated people will help ensure that key messages and materials are displayed correctly throughout the workplace.

Encourage your recycling champion to give valuable feedback from the shop floor, and help turn staff suggestions into actions. This could include co-ordinating the installation of new recycling bins, or encouraging responses on recycling through regular communications, such as newsletters or articles on the company intranet.
Be clear and concise
with communications to cut out confusion

52% of the people who took part in our research said they are confused about what they can and can’t recycle.

This statistic overwhelmingly demonstrates the need for clear and concise communications, with no room for misunderstandings. By taking this common sense approach, local authorities can ensure the right materials get recycled and reduce the risks that cross contamination will occur.

BEST PRACTICE

Design your communications materials with plenty of imagery, and less of an emphasis on the written word, as this will give it a longer ‘shelf life’ and help it reach a wider audience.

This is especially important when dealing with areas that have a high rate of turnover in population, and where a number of different languages are spoken.

We’d also recommend holding focus groups and consultation exercises, as these can make a huge difference to the effectiveness of communications campaigns.
Keep communication standards high and contact to a minimum

People will disregard advice that is badly presented or written, so professionalism is key. Despite this, mistakes still happen, attracting negative headlines for the issuing authority and making residents disengage with the process and their local councillors and officers.

The same can be said of the frequency of communications – the majority of our respondents indicated that they would prefer not to receive ‘regular’ communications, but would rather receive information only when changes are made to the system.

**BEST PRACTICE**

*It should go without saying that all communications materials should be thoroughly researched, skilfully designed, and checked scrupulously before the production process is completed.*

*This result shows that bombarding the public with too much information is unwise, so don’t be afraid to take the ‘less is more’ approach.*
Mobile technology and social media have become such a part of our day-to-day lives that we could be forgiven for thinking that other methods of communication have become obsolete. Our research proved this is not so, with 69% of respondents preferring to receive leaflets - our top answer. Receiving information via the internet came in second, followed by conventional letters, and then TV/radio.

This suggests that communications campaigns should be all-encompassing, including both ‘traditional’ and ‘hi-tech’ methods.

**BEST PRACTICE**

Leaflets detailing the dates for collections throughout the year are not the most creative way of communicating but they are hugely practical and effective, adorning many a fridge door or kitchen pin board the length and breadth of the country. However, you should combine this traditional method with more up-to-date tactics such as social media and the internet.
Survey sample

200 people completed an online test that consisted of questions regarding their current recycling behaviour and attitudes to recycling. They then viewed either positive or negative images and messages about recycling; followed by an implicit test measuring how important they felt recycling was; finishing by answering questions about their intentions to recycle in the future. The test group included a wide range of ages and professions, located across England, Scotland, Ireland and Northern Ireland.
Environmental PR is our speciality

Ceris Burns International (CBI) www.cbipr.com is a specialist international communications agency for the environmental, facilities management and cleaning industries. The team applies PR and industry know-how, plus foreign language skills to help companies in the UK and overseas perform to the very best of their ability.

Often our client PR campaigns are press relations based and involve us gaining valuable feature editorial coverage in not only recycling and waste management titles, and national and regional press but also across vertical market titles within the business, technology, local government sectors and many more. Our service range also includes corporate communications, content marketing, website and social media, crisis communications and media training services.
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