

Marketing a New Trash Collection System

When the city of **Lynchburg, Virginia** (65,500), stopped collecting trash manually and began using a semiautomated collection system, it needed to inform citizens of how the new system would affect them. The city's marketing and communications department developed an innovative marketing and communications campaign to inform residents of why the new system was needed, what types of trash receptacles were available, and when their new pickup days would be.

Leadership/staffing

An employee task force oversaw the implementation of the new trash pickup system. The task force included representation from the departments of marketing and communications, waste management, billing and collections, and social services. The communications campaign was developed through teamwork in the marketing and communications department, with feedback from the implementation task force.

Timeline

The campaign began just before the new trash collection system was implemented in 2003. Although most of the activities took place in 2003, the campaign has continued to operate since that time to ensure that citizens are aware of how the trash collection system works and to educate new residents about the system.

Budget/funding

The budget for the campaign was \$50,000, but actual costs were slightly less than that. The city was able to obtain free air time and discounts to keep campaign costs low.

Program description

The city began by informing residents of the upcoming changes in how their trash would be collected. The main changes were changes in trash pickup days,

increases in the city's common good fee, and the distribution of special 32- or 64-gallon trash carts provided by the city.

Residents needed to decide whether to order a 32-gallon or a 64-gallon cart, so the city brought the carts to public meetings in each of the city's four wards. At the meetings, citizens could try rolling the carts and have all of their questions answered. The carts were also available for viewing and touching at city hall and in the public library. The city distributed large postcards (so they would stand out from regular mail) featuring pictures of the two sizes of trash carts and asking residents to indicate which they wanted to order. To maximize resident response to the cards, the city offered free water bottles to the first 100 residents who sent their postcards back. Those who returned their cards were also eligible for a drawing for prizes—including restaurant meals, theater tickets, and museum admission passes—donated by local businesses. The drawing for the prizes was held at an open house at the city's landfill.

City staff also developed a cartoon character, Bart the Cart, and cast a local girl to interact with Bart in television and print ads. The little girl and Bart became local celebrities. At the city's landfill open house, many children asked the girl to autograph photos of her and Bart. The city also educated its 1,200 employees, reasoning that each employee could then serve as an informed spokesperson for the program with neighbors and friends.

The communications and marketing department continues to monitor residents' understanding of the system through continuing dialog with the waste management department. If problems arise, the communications and marketing department quickly takes steps to address them.

Results

Seventy percent of residents returned the postcards to indicate their choice of trashcan. The campaign generated 456 inches of newspaper copy and 90 minutes of television coverage. About 200 people attended the landfill open house, and

attendance at the neighborhood meetings was excellent. Implementation of the new trash collection system was smooth.

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