

The City's Blue Bag Campaign

Need/Opportunity

The City has been Canada's leader in recycling since it launched the Blue Box program in 1974. At inception, the Blue Box program was the second largest curbside recycling program in North America, following San Jose, California.

In 1994, the City's Council approved a 30-year waste management plan- the most ambitious municipal waste plan in Canada. The main goal of this plan is to reduce the city's dependency on landfill by diverting 70 per cent of waste from landfill by the year 2004. This will be accomplished by recycling and composting residential waste.

A critical component of the City's waste plan is the conversion from Blue Box to Blue Bag recycling. The City's 150,000 single-family households needed to voluntarily give up their blue boxes and embrace Blue Bag recycling. A conversion rate of at least 60 per cent of households within one year was needed to meet the collection and sorting efficiencies identified in the waste management strategic plan and the Branch budget.

Intended Audience

With a population of 640,000, the City's single-family households represent a diverse spectrum of demographics. The target audience for the campaign was all households already recycling. (It was not intended to motivate non-participants to begin recycling.) The challenge was to develop a campaign that would penetrate all income and education levels within the single-family sector.

The most critical characteristic of this broad target group was their universal loyalty to the Blue Box. The Blue Box had become an icon of recycling to City residents. The program had one of the highest participation rates in North America (80 to 90 per cent). While recycling rates are typically slightly higher in higher income areas, Blue Box recycling was practiced in every city neighbourhood. Residents' long-standing commitment to the Blue Box and a well-established pattern of behavior was recognized as the greatest challenge to the campaign.

Secondary target audience groups: City council and the city's 6,000 employees; Waste Management Branch employees (150); Local Media; and Grade 4 students (where waste is part of the curriculum)

Goals/Objectives

Goal:

- To create widespread awareness and acceptance of the Blue Bag recycling program and its role in meeting the City's waste diversion target of 70 per cent.

Objectives:

- To achieve at least a 60 per cent participation rate by end of 1994. (This means, 60 per cent of all households who place recyclables on the curb for pick-up are using bags instead of boxes.)
- To achieve a high rate of compliance with the types of materials and cleanliness of materials placed in blue bags. A residual rate of 15 per cent or less was needed to meet operational and marketing goals.

Solution/Project Summary

The solution developed by the public education section was a multi-faceted community relations and advertising campaign with a strong thematic link. While an advertising campaign with an emphasis on reach created a high level of immediate awareness, media relations and community outreach programs were seen as essential to fostering a fuller understanding of the benefits of the blue bag program and to leverage the advertising dollars.

Creative community outreach programs elevated this campaign from a one-way information dissemination approach to an interactive dialogue with residents. The branch mobilized its employees and approximately 100 volunteers to deliver blue bag information in a face to face manner.

Implementation and Challenges

Three main issues/challenges were identified:

- City residents had developed a strong sense of loyalty toward the Blue Box over 10 years. There was very little evidence that residents were unsatisfied with the Blue Box.
- City residents would need to purchase Blue Bags, whereas the Boxes were provided free of charge.
- Blue Boxes exemplify the concept of reuse. Plastic bags are not perceived as environmentally sensitive because of their one-time use.

Program Implementation

While the City planned to continue collecting recyclables in blue boxes for a full year after the launch of the blue bag program, the strategy was to encourage as many residents as possible to make the switch during the first two months of the campaign. This was to maximize campaign resources, rather than diffuse resources over the year. By creating a Blue Bag blitz, from mid March to mid June, a sense of excitement and momentum were created in the community.

Direct Mail

To ease residents into the program, a sample pack of 10 blue bags was delivered to each household during March. Along with the bags, residents received a brochure explaining the program, a coupon provided by *Glad* and their annual waste collection calendar (normally delivered to each household). These items were packaged in a small blue bag.

Advertising

A television, radio and print campaign ran from March 15 to April 18, to announce the program start date of April 1. A second flight ran from May 24 to June 13, to coincide with residents' need to make a first time purchase of blue bags, once their sample bags had been used. The convenience and simplicity of the bag program was reflected in the tone of the advertising. Four television commercials were produced, each demonstrating one clear benefit in a clean and snappy style that appealed to all segments of our broad audience group.

Media Relations

Local media became our greatest allies in the campaign. By working closely with them, we received more than 25 articles in local newspapers (entirely positive except for a few letters to the editor), and 130 minutes of television news coverage during the 3-month campaign. The estimated value: \$80,000.

Community Outreach programs

- 1) Materials Recovery Facility grand opening: This event was designed as a media and stakeholder event and resulted in extensive media coverage.
- 2) Materials Recovery Facility Open House: During environment week, (first week of June), 800 residents visited the facility, which has a viewing gallery. The buy-in from residents was clear in the positive comments received from virtually all who attended.
- 3) School programs: the waste branch runs a variety of school programs, all of which were modified in 1999 to highlight the blue bag program. These included a magic show, a professional puppeteer for grades K to 3, and classroom presentations and tours. The branch also sponsored, for the first time, a local non-profit arts and recycling organization - [REDACTED] - to deliver a blue bag program. In total, approximately 40,000 school children enjoyed some type of creative blue bag messaging.
- 4) For 10 years the branch has run an innovative community-based outreach program to train volunteers in home composting and recycling. More than 100 of these volunteers helped promote the blue bag program by giving presentations in their communities, attending displays at garbage fairs (local swap events) and giving media interviews.

- 5) Radio sponsorships: an investment of \$7,500 provided a promotional value of \$33,000 through a cross-promotional contest. For four weeks, a local radio station scoured City neighbourhoods in search of blue bags put out for collection. Daily prizes and a grand prize trip to [REDACTED] were awarded. Live morning show broadcasts from the recycling facility also contributed to higher awareness and understanding of the recycling process.
- 6) Displays/Mascot: The very popular [REDACTED] *Recycle* came out of partial retirement (due to resource limitations) and visited 25 community events. A Blue Bag display was set up at all these events, including festivals, home renovation and gardening shows. Enthusiastic staff answered questions and distributed blue bags.
- 7) Waste Hotline: the existing waste hotline was promoted more heavily to encourage residents to call for more information. Calls increased by 19 per cent over '98 from March to June.

Budget

Total advertising budget: \$175,000 (\$125,000 media buy, \$50,000 production costs)

Direct Mail: purchase of blue bags: \$60,000

Community outreach: all supplementary programs were built into existing budgets. These funded programs were all modified for 19[REDACTED] to carry a blue bag focus.

Selling the Solution

The branch had never before run television commercials. This was considered a risk by management, who were concerned that residents would perceive it as frivolous spending of tax dollars. Television advertising was demonstrated as being cost efficient because of the large reach attained. (Fewer than 10 complaints were received.) The scope of the campaign was sold to management as necessary to a) achieve the 60 per cent conversion needed to meet operational and budget requirements, and b) to sustain the positive goodwill the branch had established with residents through the highly successful blue box program.

Measuring/Evaluating Project Success

In October, Blue Bag participation was measured through a survey (actual count of bags put out by residents). The survey revealed that 82 per cent of residents were participating in curbside recycling, and of those, 77 per cent were using blue bags. This far exceeded our goal of 60 per cent by year-end. Contamination rates at the facility are running at about 11 per cent, meaning residents are putting the right things in the bags. This also exceeded our goal of 15 per cent.

Our solution and our strategy led to an extremely successful program. The program has been held up as a shining example of effective communications within the City, and is receiving widespread attention from other municipalities.