

We are the people engineers

Tony Blair got himself into deep water again when he claimed at a recent Labour conference “we are the change makers” - mainly because his members didn’t like the changes he was making. At the risk of facing an equivalent backlash, I wonder if it is time for CIWM to fly at least partly under a new flag – “we are the people engineers”!

Reading the Waste Strategy 2006 consultation document I was suddenly struck by the repeated emphasis that it places on: educating the public, changing behaviour, altering perceptions and shaping new attitudes. It prompts some questions. Who is going to do all this? Which profession is going to seize the opportunity to lead this vast effort in altering the national mindset? Clearly the ball lies firmly at the feet of the CIWM. But can we do it?

No one can doubt that we are the focus of the nation’s expertise in developing the new engineering technology necessary to handle the physical flow of waste as it emanates from the 26 million households and 3 million businesses across the land. New technological solutions are emerging thanks to the civil and mechanical engineers within our midst – MBT plant, in-vessel composting, new kerbside collection vehicle design, low emission efw plant, these are core to the new strategy and no-one can doubt they are meat and drink for our Institution. But it is equally evident from Waste Strategy 2006 that the momentum, the ‘direction of travel’ for future policy, lies in shifting public attitudes towards resource management, waste prevention, and incentives to encourage and manipulate householder behaviour to achieve reduced waste production and increased participation in waste diversion schemes. The WS2006 consultation also envisages an emerging role for the local authority waste manager in assisting owners of small firms and traders in reducing their waste and in making better resource utilisation.

In other words, like it or not, we are into ‘people engineering’.

To fully deliver our part in WS2006 we need to add ‘people engineering’ to our core skill set. The tools, skills, tricks and devices available to re-engineer the public mind need to become as much our ‘meat and drink’ as the civil and mechanical engineering that has long held pride of place as a defining quality of our expertise. Here are just a few of the current wave of ‘people engineering’ tools and instruments with which the future waste manager will need to be equipped.

Social Marketing

Fortunately, we are not in a unique or isolated position. Transport engineers are looking at ways of encouraging behaviour shift away from short trip car use and instead getting drivers to walk, cycle or use public transport. Public health doctors (basically ‘health-engineers’!) need to find new ways to persuade people to stop smoking,

eat healthier, take more exercise and de-stress. Across a vast array of fields in public service, technical professionals are starting to become people engineers.

Social marketing is a body of knowledge on how to do this well. According to the guidance recently issued by the National Social Marketing Centre of Excellence¹ (an initiative led by the National Consumer Council) “*social marketing is the systematic application of marketing concepts and techniques to achieve specific behavioural goals relevant to a social good*”. Nothing better sums up what we in wastes management are attempting to do in delivering the future Waste Strategy.

Social marketing as an applied science, rests on some key principles which we may find challenging:

- ◆ It puts the citizen or customer at the centre of policy and practice – it’s not about us putting in the infrastructure that we think works and then desperately struggling to get people to do what we want. It works the other way, by finding out what motivates people and putting in a solution that fits the motive.
- ◆ It suggests we have relied too much on message generation and message communication approaches (bombarding people with ‘thou shalt’ messages). It suggests we need to move away from this and towards achieving specific behaviour goals by listening to people more and devising messages that are effective in prompting actual behaviour change.

If our aim is to change behaviour we need to know more about the way behaviour change happens and the tools and techniques to egg it along in a positive direction. Once again, the field of social and behavioural science has built a strong and robust body of theory and some practical ways of influencing what people do, based on this scientific model. A powerful example is the ‘contemplation of change’ model.

Contemplation of Change

Achieving behaviour change goals means understanding how people approach the challenge of changing behaviour. Few are converted in a blinding flash of realisation on the road to Damascus. Social marketing rests on an understanding of behavioural psychology and its realisation that for most of the human race, achieving a dramatic shift in personal behaviour comes about through a series of distinct steps. Social marketing is about helping and persuading people through these steps at a pace people can handle. Research shows there are five core stages in fundamental behaviour change:

- ◆ **Pre-contemplative** – never thought of it
- ◆ **Contemplative** – can see in the mind’s eye what might be done
- ◆ **Ready to act** – have resolved to take action and prepared for the result
- ◆ **Experimenting** – doing it and seeing what life is like as a result

¹ French F, Blair-Stevens C, ‘Social Marketing Pocket Guide’, National Consumer Council, London, 2006.

- ◆ **Sustaining** – building the new behaviours into unconscious second nature.

This is the modern approach to campaigns such as giving up smoking or alcohol. We can learn from this and apply it to much more sophisticated approaches to getting people to deal differently with their waste. For example doctors will not spend time and effort on high value 'quit smoking' programmes if they think their patient is 'pre-contemplative' i.e. is not seriously ready and willing to give up. Instead they use approaches that are more about just getting someone to think about the idea. Similarly Alcoholics Anonymous focus on people who are 'committed quitters' – time wasters need not apply.

There is much for us to learn here on who to target what particular waste diversion messages to. At the moment we spend an awful lot of time and public money throwing expensive promotional material at people who simply are not ready to register an interest. Doorstepping is mainly done 'en masse' with 'bog standard' materials for each and every household irrespective of their stage of development. If the NHS was as cavalier in scattering its resources like confetti on an homogenised public it would be rightfully accused of squandering precious public money.

Motivational Models

From this it becomes very obvious that we need better insight into what will motivate people to change behaviour. Again there are many transferable lessons from other 'people engineering' experience. Why do smokers quit? The factors precipitating change are many – concern for personal health, concern for family health, cash cost, convenience are the main ones. Some people don't believe the health message but they are acutely conscious of what else they might do with all that money. Find the motive and the message that 'bites' is pretty obvious – without this insight we are shooting in the dark.

One implication of this, which we are working on at M.E.L Research, is that we need to develop a much more sophisticated approach to 'doorstepping' promotional recycling campaigns. Instead of spending vast sums on a monolithic, bog-standard promotional message pack, we need to break down our population into segments based on what motivates that household and where it sits on the 'contemplation of change' spectrum. We then need to deliver a highly personalised follow-up package, dedicated to that category of household, and delivered by a 'personal recycling advisor' competent enough to fine tune the message, helping them through the steps towards fundamental behaviour change. This is 'precision grade people engineering' and it will be far more effective than a 'blunder-bus' approach which treats everyone as if they are the same.

Adding 'people engineering' to our core skill set

CIWM has made vast strides since the Royal Charter, and has an ambitious development plan for the future. Strategically, this article shows that a crucial step in the future transformation of our profession and its leading Institution, centres on 'people engineering'. We need to add 'people engineering' as a defining core quality,

resting at the heart of the suite of skills and competences that make up the 'excellent waste manager' of the future.

Dr Robert Pocock FCIWM

Dr Pocock is chair of the CIWM Healthcare SIG and chief executive of the national waste management consultancy practice M.E.L Research Limited.