

South Wales Fire & Rescue Services

Demand Management – Preventing Grass Fires

In brief:

- South Wales Fire & Rescue Services faced a critical challenge from an annual spring spate of mountain and grass fires that placed unsustainable demand on resources and posed considerable risks for fire fighters, members of the public and property.
- In 2009, Alexander was asked, in association with Dr Sue Peattie of Cardiff University, to design a new approach to limiting this predictable demand based on Social Marketing principles and methodology.
- Applying social marketing principles and methodology and working with a range of community and stakeholder groups, an integrated set of interventions based on a “social marketing mix” were designed and piloted in the spring of 2010.
- As a result of the pilot, the number of incidents reduced by 46% over the campaign period and similar initiatives were rolled out across 4 unitary authority areas and in 2011 and 2012 further reductions in the number of deliberate grass fires were recorded – 27% and 48% respectively.
- In 2012 crime statistics also showed a 51% reduction in antisocial behaviour incidents during the campaign in comparison with the same period in 2011.
- These results show that co-ordinated action – based on clear insight and understanding of behavioural drivers and motivation, led by a coalition of community organisations can be effective in reducing demand on public services whilst building community awareness and cohesion.

South Wales
Fire and Rescue Service



BRAS

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Accountability, Sustainability & Society

Think with us ...

If you're reading this, then you're probably just like us, always curious about new ways of working.

The aim of our case studies is to promote sharing of knowledge and from it thought leadership. We hope this study helps you think through and explore some of the issues we now face.

Your questions and feedback are welcome.

Call us on 023 8022 5520 or email anta.zerva@alexander-ecc.co.uk.



Fire prevention through community liaison and education has been part of Fire & Rescue Services' remit for some time. Whilst measuring effectiveness can be difficult, it is seen as a worthwhile approach where it reduces injuries and saves lives.

For South Wales Fire & Rescue Services (SWFRS), an annual spring spate of mountain and grass fires had become a critical issue as traditional prevention efforts failed to stem the number of incidents increasing to more than 7,000. The sheer volume of incidents, with associated risks such as heat exhaustion and injuries to fire fighters, was pushing the entire region's fire fighting resources to the limit.

Costs of attending "deliberate grass fires" were put at some £7m annually – excluding the costs of environmental damage, effects on local businesses and tourism and the risk to life posed by fires that encroached on property.

In 2009, Alexander was asked, in association with Dr Sue Peattie of Cardiff University, to design a new approach to intervention and prevention based on Social Marketing principles and methodology.

Scoping

The initial phase of the project involved developing greater insight and understanding of the problem based on data already held by SWFRS. This research and analysis revealed two hot spots and peaks of activity by month, week and (time of) day.

Although this revealed the "when" and "where" around deliberate grass fire incidents, it did not reveal "who" the perpetrators might be and "why" they went about setting fires. No reliable data existed as, for example, no-one had ever been prosecuted.

We designed a series of in-depth interviews and focus group events and these were facilitated with SWFRS staff. This helped us build a profile of perpetrators and an understanding of their motivation. The interviews and focus groups took a broader view of stakeholder groups and included Schools, Colleges, youth organisations, the Forestry Commission, Police, Local Authorities and Community Safety Partnership.

The outcome was a consensus on the profile of fire setters – male, aged 7 – 17 years – and their motivation – boredom, thrill-seeking and peer group pressure. It was also found that, for some parents, setting deliberate grass fires was "innocent fun", others had been turning a blind eye to the practice and some had also set fires in their youth.

Developing a response

The SWFRS data, combined with insights gained from further research enabled and informed the formulation of a strategic social marketing mix and design of an integrated set of interventions that included:

- A series of events in the target area – designed by young people for young people;
- Teenagers from a local community college developed a campaign brand based on a logo – Bernie the sheep – and a strapline "Grass is green, Fire is mean";
- Creation of a Bernie Facebook site that personalised the issues and dangers and drew attention to the effect of deliberate grass fires on landscapes, people and animals for the large number of friends attracted to the site;
- Innovative use of community business support to raise awareness and interest in the objectives and benefits in reducing the incidence of deliberate grass fires;
- Visible joint patrols of police and FRS targeted on key areas at critical times to reinforce messages that attitudes towards deliberate grass fires needed to change and that passive tolerance was not sustainable.

A critical change to previous approaches came through the research that showed a need to inform and educate parents – a group not previously seen as a target audience.

Implementation

The principal objective was to reduce the number of deliberate grass fires in the target area over the 6-week period by 15% in comparison with a neighbouring "control" area with similar profile and level of deliberate grass fires.

A pilot initiative was launched on March 2010 – leading up to a period of intense diversionary activity for young people over a 6-week period including the 2-week Easter holidays. This comparison was controlled for factors such as weather and timing of Easter holidays.

There were 2 behavioural goals:

- To promote socially positive alternative behaviours and limit or remove opportunities for negative behaviour that could lead to deliberate causing of grass fires – with a particular focus on young people between 13 – 16 years of age (school year group 9-11);
- To encourage and support key professionals and organisations in working together, adopting a holistic and co-ordinated approach.



Evaluation

Data collected over the 6-week period showed the following results:

- Easter holiday – 30% reduction in deliberate grass fires
- 6-week period – 46% reduction in deliberate grass fires

The results – independently corroborated and adjusted for a range of external factors – also evidenced significant changes in behaviour in the target area and achievement of behavioural goals.

As a result of these achievements, SWFRS were able to secure Welsh Government funding to extend the pilot across the South Wales region and we have continued to track results.

Outcomes

2011

- In 2011 the deliberate grass fires prevention model was rolled out across 4 unitary authority areas – Bridgend, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taff. Each area adopted a similar mix of interventions to the 2010 pilot with some innovation based on local insights and through community involvement – such as youth advisory panels. Significantly, the mix included high-profile press and media campaigns – attracting the attention of national stations and channels. Over the 6-week campaign period, the number of deliberate grass fires across the four unitary authority areas fell by 27% against the principal objective of 15% - comparing 2011 with 2010. This reduction was achieved in the hottest and driest conditions on record and, for Rhondda Cynon Taff, where the 2010 pilot had been focused, the reduction in incidents was an impressive 40% - building on the success of the pilot.
- A multi-agency approach was adopted, led by Unitary Authority Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) – leveraging achievement against the second behavioural goal.
- The Bernie brand was extended through merchandise and “live chat” with Bernie through the Facebook site – with numbers of friends exceeding 1700 by the end of the 2011 campaign.
- 568 young people aged 11 – 18 benefited from involvement in diversionary activities and there were 132 days of high-visibility joint police / FRS patrols. A further distinctive feature of this campaign was a comprehensive post-campaign review that identified – with partners – the strengths and weaknesses of the campaign and opportunities for improvement.

2012

- During 2012, the 4 unitary authorities continued their involvement in the deliberate grass fires initiative on a similar basis to 2011.
- Diversionary activity in the initial 2-week period of the 6-week campaign was reduced – reflecting delay in engagement amongst organisations comprising the CSP. This was a key difference between the 2012 campaign and those in 2011 and 2010. Notwithstanding this, 810 young people aged 11 – 18 took part in diversionary activities.
- There were 210 days of high-visibility joint police / FRS patrols and the first ever prosecution for arson related to the deliberate setting of grass fires was successful.
- The profile of the campaign was increased through a launch in the Brecon Beacons – covered by ITV and BBC.
- The Bernie Facebook live chat sessions continued and the number of friends increased by nearly 900 to over 2750. One area introduced the concept of Bernie ambassadors in schools.
- The result was a 48% year-on-year reduction in incidents and evaluation accepts that some of this reduction would have been due to poor weather in April, following a particularly dry and warm March.
- In evaluating the 2012 campaign, SWFRS also reviewed related crime statistics in one of the areas. This revealed a 51% reduction in antisocial behaviour incidents recorded during the campaign in comparison with the same period on 2011.

Alexander is an independent change management consultancy that specialises in strategy alignment, performance management and improvement.

For further information please contact Anta on 023 8022 5520 or email anta.zerva@alexander-ecc.co.uk.



Alexander People - what we believe

Alexander people are business people who are passionate about public services. We take what's good from the private sector and shape it to meet the demands and challenges of public service. So when we look at the world and see what's wrong, our instinct is not to complain about it, it's to do something about it. This means that, when we look at our own company, we don't just look at its performance as a business; we look at the difference we make to changing public services and society for the better.

The people who manage and deliver public services today face huge challenges. They deserve someone to think with and people who can help to do the things they haven't the capacity to do themselves.

That's why we **engage** and connect with the people at all levels in public services who face these challenges.

Then we help them **challenge** the way things are.

So that they can deliver real **change** for the better.

That's what we do: **Engage. Challenge. Change.**

There's a belief that, without a profit motive, there isn't enough to drive public services to be better. We say that the stakes couldn't be higher. For people who work in and with public services, if we fail, society fails. We believe this is the most powerful driver there is.

Alexander People - what we do

Knowing where to go and how to get there

- Strategic & organisational review and diagnosis
- Shared vision
- Transformation strategy
- Transformation blueprint
- Stakeholder engagement
- Change readiness
- Communications

Delivering customer value with less resources

- Lean Systems Thinking
- Service transformation, design and improvement
- Shared services
- Function and service reviews
- Options appraisals and business case development

Enabling change to happen

- Programme and project management
- Change Management and benefits realisation
- Building capacity to change
- Skills and knowledge transfer

Making change sustainable

- Leadership development
- Management development
- Continuous improvement strategy and culture
- Skills and knowledge transfer

We work with...

Alexander works with people & organisations in the public sector, including:

- District Councils
- Unitary Authorities
- County Councils
- Housing Associations
- Police Services
- Health Services

If you'd like to talk about how we can help you, call us on 023 8022 5520.

Alexander - contact us

Telephone 023 8022 5520

Email talkwithus@alexander-ecc.co.uk

Unit 2 Freemantle Business Centre

152 Millbrook Road East

Southampton

SO15 1JR