

Case Study: Halton Region's GreenCart Demonstration Program

Background:

Any time the public is asked to substantially change their daily routine, it is critical that a sound and strategic communications strategy is implemented to help ease the transition. This was the case when Halton Region, the upper tier level of government representing the 400,000 residents of the City of Burlington and Towns of Halton Hills, Milton and Oakville, decided to launch an organics collection program to reduce the amount of organic material going to Halton's landfill and therefore extend the life of this important resource. The GreenCart program was launched in October 2005 to approximately 5,000 households in each of Halton's four municipalities. While Halton residents had achieved an admirable residential waste diversion rate of almost 42% in 2005, provincial direction was that communities should be striving to achieve a 60% diversion rate and the only way this could be achieved would be through implementing an organics collection program. Since the program dramatically impacted how residents handled their garbage, there was a need for a strategic communications strategy that would help increase resident buy-in to the new way of sorting and handling waste.

Research:

Halton Regional Council recognized the need to divert more residential waste away from Halton's landfill. Given the logistical difficulties and expense associated with launching such a program on a Region-wide basis, direction was given to test an organics collection program and Council approved that a demonstration program start in the fall of 2005.

The year leading up to the launch of the GreenCart program was filled with a two-pronged research approach. While Waste Management's technical staff were researching how to operate the program, I was brought in at the very beginning of the program and began researching the best ways to communicate the substantial change to our residents.

Halton was fortunate in that other municipalities were also in the midst of starting organics collection programs. The first step was contacting our neighbouring municipalities to research their communications programs. Through this step, I was able to learn the strengths of various communications strategies and tactics, the areas for improvement, as well as identifying key issues that would arise and need to be communicated. I was also able to look back and research the communications for the implementation of the Blue Box program and learn from the issues surrounding its roll out in our community.

I held key discussions with Halton Region's Joint Solid Waste Management Committee, a citizen advisory panel consisting of eight residents and four Regional Councillors, to hear directly from residents what they anticipated concerns to be.

Before the program began, I organized open houses in each of the communities where the GreenCart demonstration program would run. Averaging 20 people per open house, I was able to hear from residents' concerns regarding the program firsthand and this information helped me form and enhance the communications program for the roll-out.

A critical component of developing a successful communications strategy for this program was research that directly surveyed not only participants in the GreenCart program, but also the Halton population as a whole. I hired Ipsos-Reid to conduct two GreenCart demonstration program telephone surveys, asking 450 residents across our four local municipalities their thoughts on the GreenCart program and how to improve it. To ensure a broad spectrum of the demonstration program was reached, we also conducted mail-in surveys, online web-based surveys and door-to-door discussion-provoking surveys. Each time a survey was conducted, there were specific questions that related to the communications aspect of the program, and I would incorporate changes into our strategy as needed.

The extensive and ongoing research enabled me to develop a strategic communications strategy that would engage our community while conducting a demonstration program that would provide Regional Council with insight on how to proceed with the program.

Analysis:

My assessment of the situation based on the research findings revealed the following public relations issues:

- Concern over the “yuck” factor of the program – is my garbage going to smell? Am I going to get rats?
- Resentment over being included in the demonstration program – why do I have to do this and not the rest of my community?
- Lack of understanding surrounding the need for the program
- Concern over whether or not the program would work

In order to address these issues, as well as the overriding issue surrounding resistance to change, the objectives of the communication strategy were:

- To raise awareness among residents in the five demonstration program areas of the introduction of the GreenCart program and their role in the pilot project;
- To establish community feedback mechanisms that will provide Halton Region with accurate information about the demonstration program’s viability, areas of improvement and community acceptance; and
- To educate all Halton residents, both in and out of the demonstration program, on the importance of the GreenCart program and its role in increasing Halton’s diversion rate, while building support for a Region-wide roll-out.

Audience/Stakeholders

- Halton residents
 - Demonstration program participants
 - Leaders of community groups
 - Local business groups/businesses
 - Relevant citizen advisory committees
 - All Halton residents
- Employees
 - Halton staff to serve as ambassadors for program
 - Front-line staff to answer questions
 - Staff whose role may change due to new program
 - Staff of Local Municipalities
- Local Media (*circulation numbers*)

Oakville Beaver (89,000 weekly)	Oakville Today (28,000 weekly)
Georgetown Independent (44,000 weekly)	Burlington Post (108,000 weekly)
Milton Champion (42,900 weekly)	Acton Tanner (9,000 weekly)
Halton Compass (150,000 weekly)	
- Regional Council
- Provincial government, especially Ministry of the Environment re. meeting provincial diversion targets
- Community groups, especially environmental groups

Key Messages:

The following key messages were developed for use with audiences and stakeholders:

- The GreenCart program is like a Blue Box for your kitchen scraps. It's an essential part of Halton's waste management program that will increase our diversion rate, keep waste out of the landfill and extend the life of this important resource.
- We know that the GreenCart program is a change for 5,000 households across Halton in the demonstration area. To help make the program easy to use, we'll give each household a comprehensive information package to get them started and be easily available any time residents have questions.
- We want to hear from you on how we can improve the GreenCart program. We'll continually evaluate and review the program through residential feedback. Please help us make the program work for you by answering our phone surveys, calling us with your suggestions or sending us an email with your thoughts.

Communications:

Halton Region began actively communicating about the GreenCart demonstration program in the summer of 2005, before its official October launch. Communications carried on throughout 2006 and 2007 as the program was modified based on resident feedback, as well as to encourage increased participation.

Print collateral to build anticipation of program. Direct mail postcards promoting the upcoming program to residents in the demonstration areas; posters in key community areas such as arenas; letters to community groups introducing the program and more all helped build awareness and anticipation of the program.

Print collateral to educate. An extensive information package was created to educate residents on how to participate in the program. Package included magnets, flyers, sample bags to use in the program and more.

Media relations campaign. Through photo opportunities, media releases, arranging media stories profiling GreenCart families and other aspects of our media relations campaign, we were able to communicate the GreenCart messaging with the Halton community at large, not just those within the demonstration area.

Public participation. Open houses where residents were able to have hands-on experience with the GreenCart program before it was introduced as well as have face-to-face contact with staff were well received. GreenCart material was available at community events. I hired Quorum Communications to create a three minute instructional video that played at the open houses, as well as streamed on our website.

Website. Website posted continuously updated program information, Q&A's, fact sheets.

Advertising. Advertising focused on building anticipation of the program, educating public about campaign and opportunity for public involvement at the open houses.

Internal communications. Fact sheets and Q&A's were created for staff. Display boards promoting the arrival of the program were displayed in well-travelled hallways at the Regional Centre.

"Free" communications vehicles. Local newspapers provide Halton Region with free space to educate the community on programs and services.

- Masthead (120 words/week in four local newspapers)
- Simply Halton (full page/month in four local newspapers)
- Councillor Ward newsletters

Budget

The majority of resources used were in-house communications expertise provided by myself and one graphic design specialist. At the beginning of the project, I hired Quorum Communications to assist with the development of the communications strategy and act as a resource to bounce ideas off of. I continually modified the plan to meet Halton's needs and the changing needs of the program based on ongoing research.

Printing costs	\$56,324	Public participation	\$1,363
Video	\$9,500	Advertising	\$11,550
Ipsos Reid research	\$45,728	Consultant support	\$14,300

Total budget: \$162,765

Through the free space provided to Halton Region by local newspapers, we also had \$14,566 worth of free communications printed in all of our local newspapers (\$2,596 – masthead; \$11,970 – Simply Halton page).

Evaluation:

Objective 1 -- To raise awareness among residents in the five demonstration program areas of the introduction of the GreenCart program and their role in the pilot project.

Surveys through Ipsos-Reid showed that approximately half of those surveyed had seen recent advertising or publicity about the GreenCart, while 96% of those in the demonstration area recalled receiving a GreenCart information package with satisfaction with the package being very high with 93% very/somewhat satisfied. Good media coverage during the program roll-out also got the GreenCart message out to the larger community. Almost half of those surveyed during the December 2005 survey stated that what they liked most about the GreenCart program was that it is either good for the environment or that less garbage was going to the landfill. This showed that our messaging was getting through to our target audience.

Objective 2 -- To establish community feedback mechanisms that will provide Halton Region with accurate information about the demonstration program’s viability, areas of improvement and community acceptance.

We implemented a variety of feedback mechanisms for the public to use, all of which provided us with useful information about the program with feedback resulting in changes to the program and in how we communicated. Polling consistently showed that the website was not a preferred method of communication with our audience, with around 4% of those surveyed visiting the site. As such we created the GreenCart newsletter that was mailed to each participating household. We also learned, through phone surveys and emails received through the website, that the public was dissatisfied with the bags used in the program. This information led us to implement a new style of bag which increased satisfaction. (50% of a test program preferred plastic bags, while 14% preferred paper, leading us to roll out the option of plastic bags.) Feedback tools included phone surveys, door-to-door in person surveys, mail-in surveys, online surveys and face to face discussions at community events, as well as our call-centre.

Objective 3 -- To educate all Halton residents, both in and out of the demonstration program, on the importance of the GreenCart program and its role in increasing Halton’s diversion rate, while building support for a Region-wide roll-out.

Ipsos-Reid survey results consistently show that we were successful in building support for a Region-wide roll out of the GreenCart program. In December 2005, 82% said yes to expanding the program to the rest of Halton Region. In March 2006, 94% said the program should be rolled to some or all of Halton Region.